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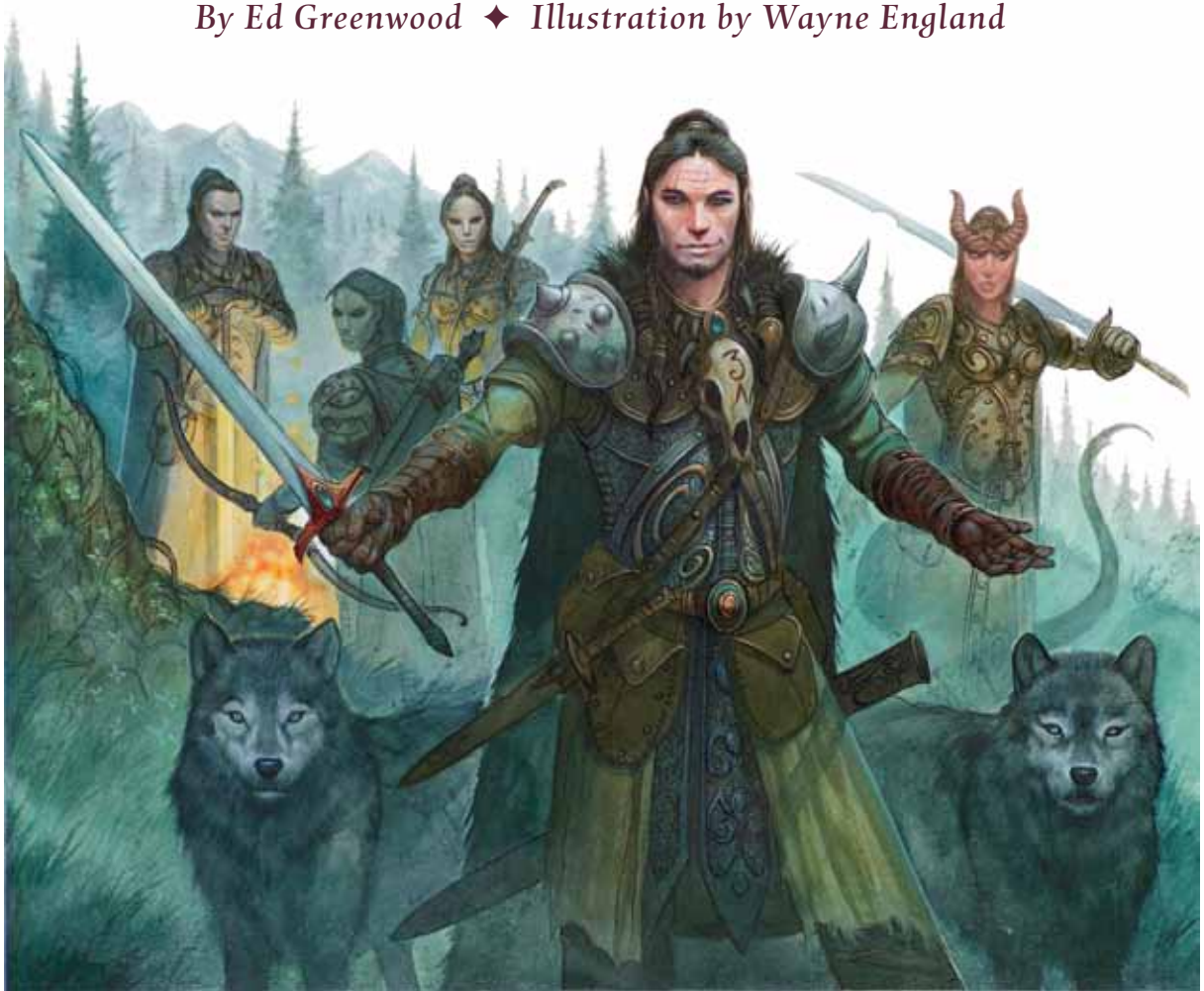
ED GREENWOOD'S

Eye on the Realms

Queen Filfaeril's Blades

By Ed Greenwood ✦ Illustration by Wayne England



The beautiful, capable, strong-willed wife of King Azoun IV of Cormyr is now long dead, but she left behind a hidden, living legacy. A small, secretive band of loyal agents, her personal Blades, remain dedicated to furthering her aims for the Forest Kingdom. Still willing to slay and die in her memory, they seek to make "Fee's Fire" burn in every Cormyrean's heart and hearth.

The Founding

In life, Queen Filfaeril, or "Queen Fee" to those close to her, was a masterful manipulator who did much to guide the realm from behind the scenes. She governed her husband even more firmly and effectively than the wily and powerful Royal Magician Vangerdahast did. She also influenced events at court, as well as the tide of rumor and popular opinion, far more subtly than even the "most brightshield" (smoothest) of courtiers.

Filfaeril worked by means of deft and subtle inferences, suggestions, and misdirection (particularly by spreading false rumors) where Vangerdahast bluntly threatened, mustered War Wizards to his will, and gave orders. In contrast to them all, her royal husband gave imperious royal commands. Azoun knew what his beloved Fee was doing, and he loved her for it, with occasional testy irritation being his strongest negative reaction. Vangerdahast and Filfaeril fought an ongoing battle on many levels. The wizard believed that only he had the wisdom and good judgment to guide Cormyr, and Filfaeril was grimly determined to ensure that Azoun should rule the realm, with

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Vangey acting as a wise advisor and capable servant at most.

This three-way power struggle seldom boiled over into open confrontation or anger, because all three participants (despite what others believed) had the best interests of Cormyr at heart. They frequently disagreed on what those interests were, but none of them was concerned with gaining personal advancement or power for its own sake.

Azoun, Vangerdahast, and a handful of other Wizards of War (such as the senior "mother" War Wizard, Laspeera) and courtiers (such as the sage Alaphondar) were aware Filfaeril worked covertly with the Harpers. They also knew that she had her own handful of spies and agents, including some Highknights who were more loyal to her than to Vangey or Azoun. Yet Filfaeril also had a smaller handful of personal agents that she (with the aid of Storm Silverhand and Dove Falconhand) successfully kept secret even from her husband and the all-seeing Vangerdahast. These people were her Blades, a dozen or so human, halfling, gnome, and half-elf Cormyreans who were crucial in blunting several noble revolts. Such lethal response from the Blades had a chilling effect on rebellious nobles, who began thinking carefully about the personal consequences of sedition.

Today, nearly ninety years after Filfaeril's death, the descendants of the original Blades are active in Cormyr and wherever powerful Cormyreans go in the Realms. They continue to carry out the aims of the dead queen, operating as an independent secret society that is known to the Harpers and, on rare occasions, working with Those Who Harp. The group is only a persistent rumor to the current War Wizards of the realm, and it avoids all wizards as much as possible.

A Right Loyal Company

Queen Filfaeril's Blades are now about two dozen strong, and they have another dozen or so novices who do little more than act as passive "eyes and ears" for the veterans. Most Blades are rogues (of 5th through 12th level, most of them aerialists), backed by a few fighters (of 6th through 12th level, most being 7th or 8th). Their current leader, Toraunt Hawkgar (a good human male 12th-level rogue), took over the Blades after the violent death of Anathur Hawkhorn.

Before Toraunt's time as leader, Hawkhorn, the grandson of Baerlus Hawkhorn and a bastard son of Azoun IV, held the mantle of leadership of the Blades. Like other Blades leaders before him, he was intensely loyal to the Obarskyr family and the realm of Cormyr, and he was dedicated to moving into accord with the aims of Queen Fee with a minimum of bloodshed. If a reigning king or queen of Cormyr has to be eliminated to bring about a Forest Kingdom that follows Filfaeril's aims, the Blades have failed—but defending the monarch against those opposed to Queen Fee's aims, with violence whenever necessary, is essential and entirely acceptable.

Anathur dubbed the Blades as being "a right loyal company" and began the tradition of reporting the deeds of the Blades to Filfaeril's personal crown as if she was still alive. The crown in question is her personal "tall tiara" rather than the heavier and more valuable "state" crown that she wore at her marriage to Azoun, which remains a treasure of the realm in the vaults beneath the Royal Palace. Over the years, this near-worship of the Queen's Crown has engendered reverence and awe among the Blades. Many of the younger members believe that Filfaeril's spirit perceives the world through the crown, which Toraunt keeps hidden except during Blades meetings at which he is present. Some say that it sends dreams and other "signs" to individual Blades who call on her when they are uncertain what to do.

Anathur was murdered by furious elder Cormyrean nobles in 1471 DR when they overheard him explaining that better-paid servants and tenants who were treated as social equals would be happier and more loyal than oppressed ones. Over the years since, Anathur has been slowly and carefully avenged by his chosen successor, Toraunt. This most recent leader of the Blades has slain Anathur's killers in a series of clever murders that he arranged to seem like accidents that were caused by the dead nobles' own excesses or imprudent actions.

Other than those slayings, Toraunt's leadership of the Blades has avoided most bloodshed. He prefers to keep a low profile instead of doing dramatic deeds and gaining a growing "rumorfire reputation." Since most of the Blades share his preferences for being deft, silent, and patient, there has thus far been little dissatisfaction with his style of leadership.

Toraunt's trusted lieutenants are his lover Maharantrae Snardren (a good half-elf female 10th-level aerialist rogue, who is an accomplished dancer and sometime revel-consort and tutor to young nobles) and Daskur Halorth (a good human male 12th-level fighter, who is of stolid rural—Hullack—Cormyrean stock). Maharantrae and Daskur maintain internal discipline within the Blades and watch for infiltrators. Thus far they have seen no disloyalty, in large part because Toraunt runs the Blades diplomatically, giving all senior members a say in missions and activities, and adopting good ideas from the entire membership.

Aims High and True

The dream Queen Filfaeril had for Cormyr is the Cause of the Blades, though more often they call it "Fee's Fire." It is this: Although no kingdom can ever be free of strife, struggles for more power, and personal feuds and hatreds, a land is strong when most of its inhabitants are prosperous and busy, and when inhabitants can see clear rewards for being law-abiding citizens day in and day out. The strength and sense of ownership the citizens gain can lead to them gladly rendering extra support to Crown and realm in troubled times.

In other words, the "old ways" of wealthy, oppressive nobles lording it over commoners who have fewer rights and less coin must be swept away. This process must be done in a slow, subtle, guided way and with as little violence as possible. Fee and her Blades want commoners to gain wealth and take pride and pleasure in being Cormyrean without seeing lawbreaking or "becoming noble" as the only ways to achieve such contentment.

So for commoner and noble alike, coin must be more equitably distributed through "solid" salaries and fair treatment before the law and in the marketplaces. The Cause of the Blades calls for this goal to be accomplished by changing the attitudes of Cormyreans over time and through open adjustments of Crown law, not by overthrowing nobles or the Dragon Throne, nor by strengthening guilds into militant antinoble groups.

Queen Filfaeril further saw that the more widely Cormyr traded not just with its neighbors, but with those far across the Realms, the less "outland" (mysterious, distant, and expendable or disliked) the Forest Kingdom would seem. Rulers elsewhere would treat the Land of the Purple Dragon as useful, formidable, and worthy of respect, and not as a land to be feared, dismissed, sneered at, or readily made war upon.

Doing the above would, in turn, make Cormyr more prosperous and important, benefiting all Cormyreans.

Bold and Recent Exploits

The Blades seek to further Fee's Fire by forging friendships and business partnerships between nobles (particularly younger nobles) and commoners. They try to guide such relationships into being conducted in the open, rather than in secrecy behind mansion gates, so that they can minimize traditional perceptions of nobles "buying and corrupting" commoners with whom they deal.

At the same time, they try to expose and thwart nobles who work against the Dragon Throne (in acts ranging from dire treason to small-time smuggling and evading taxes), and they try to spread the attitude that nobles and commoners should be treated equally in law and in everyday business practices.

This season, the Blades have been active in Amn and along the trade routes, trying to frustrate Cormyrean nobles (notably of the Gauntweather and Hartalan families) who've been hiring armed thugs to harass rivals and seize goods outside Cormyr. In Suzail, they've been working hard to sow distrust between angry nobles who gathered for King Foril's Council of Dragons (see *Elminster Must Die!* and *Bury Elminster Deep*), to prevent strong anti-Crown alliances from forming, and to highlight the harsh reactions of nobles who seek to roll back the rights that King Foril granted to commoners. The Blades try to expose traitor nobles, frustrate their attempts to place spies in the Palace and at Court, and exacerbate long-standing feuds and rivalries among the nobles to break up common fronts before they can gain solidity.

The Blades seek to learn all noble plots and schemes, and they act against those who weaken the Dragon Throne and would thwart the aims of Queen Filfaeril. As they do all this, they whisper, "For Filfaeril and Cormyr, forever!"

About the Author

Ed Greenwood is the man who unleashed the Forgotten Realms® setting on an unsuspecting world. He works in libraries, plus he writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and even romance stories (sometimes all in the same novel), but he is still happiest when churning out Realmslore, Realmslore, and more Realmslore. He still has a few rooms in his house in which he has space left to pile up papers. . .

Creature Incarnations

Duergar

By Craig A. Campbell ✦ Illustration by Lake Hurwitz

Duergar—the name inspires terror in the hearts of adventurers.

Who are these fell cousins of the dwarves? What strange and fearsome rules govern their society? Where do they live, and how do they protect themselves? What can adventurers expect when they venture into the realm of this devil-worshiping race?

Welcome to the (under)world of the duergar.

Duergar Society

A strict caste system—based on strength, inventiveness, influence, and number of slaves owned—forms the basis of duergar society. Duergar advance through treachery against caste and clan.

Duergar Caste System

The lowest duergar caste consists of the chechik, who are slaves with no hope of upward mobility. They live short lives of hard labor, combat, and humiliation.

The next caste, the guegalan, takes its name from a Deep Speech word meaning "mighty crafters." Most of them are weaponsmiths, artisans, and armorers. They can rise in standing by constructing great traps, fortifications, and weapons, or by managing large numbers of slaves.

Above the guegalan stand the zharaak: soldiers, raiders, slave traders, and low-level governors. Few zharaak ever move upward; most die in battle or are betrayed and murdered by their cohorts.

Military leaders, raid captains, heads of slave-trading houses, and mid-level governors form the next caste up, the dethikan.

The highest caste, consisting of a few hundred duergar, is the klegesk. These are supreme generals, high-level governors, and master wizards and clerics. The struggle for supremacy still goes on between members of this highest caste. The klegesk constantly vie for greater reach and authority, plotting against one another in lifelong power plays.

Attitudes Toward Other Races

Duergar view the intelligent races of the Underdark as enemies to be destroyed or enslaved. They wage war continually against the drow, derros, kuo-toas, and troglodytes for territory and resources. Occasionally, duergar form alliances with these foes, but such alliances are honored only so long as they work in the duergar's favor.

Aboleths and neogi are the duergar's primary rivals in the slave trade. These three races never form

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alliances or trade slaves with one another, though they have been known to observe temporary truces. Duergar despise beholders and envy their ability to enslave and control entire populations with apparent ease.

Of all the Underdark races, the duergar hate the mind flayers most of all, because it was the mind flayers who enslaved them for countless generations. Duergar never barter or deal with illithids; they slaughter every one that falls into their clutches. No duergar will admit it, but mind flayers terrify them.

To duergar, surface communities merit consideration only as sources for slaves, food, and plunder.

Gifts from Asmodeus

Asmodeus, the devil lord who oversaw the duergar's emancipation from the illithids, takes a particular interest in the race. He considers them useful pawns, and he grants gifts to particularly strong and loyal duergar.

Variant Quill Powers

The simplest of Asmodeus's gifts are variations on the *infernal quills* power that duergar naturally possess. If you want some of your duergar to receive such boons, replace their *infernal quills* power with one of the following, according to the individual duergar's role. All of these variants are minor actions.

Artillery

Slowing Quills (poison) ✦ **Encounter**
Attack: Ranged 10 (one creature); level + 5 vs. AC
Hit: 1d8 + 4 damage, and the target is slowed and takes ongoing 5 poison damage (save ends both).
Levels 11-30: 2d8 + 6 damage, and the target takes ongoing 10 poison damage and is slowed (save ends both).

Brutes

Bloodletting Quills ✦ **Encounter**
Attack: Ranged 3 (one creature); level + 5 vs. AC
Hit: 1d8 damage, and ongoing 10 damage (save ends).
Levels 11-30: 2d8 damage, and ongoing 15 damage (save ends).

Controllers

Enslaving Quills (charm, poison) ✦ **Encounter**
Attack: Ranged 5 (one creature); level + 5 vs. AC
Hit: 1d8 + 4 damage, and the target takes ongoing 5 poison damage and cannot attack the duergar (save ends both).
Levels 11-30: 2d8 + 6 damage, and the target takes ongoing 10 poison damage and cannot attack the duergar (save ends both).

Lurkers

Blinding Quills ✦ **Encounter**
Attack: Ranged 3 (one creature); level + 5 vs. AC
Hit: 1d8 + 4 damage, and the target is blinded (save ends).
Levels 11-30: 2d8 + 6 damage, and the target is blinded (save ends).

Skirmishers

Hindering Quills (poison) ✦ **Encounter**
Attack: Ranged 3 (one creature); level + 5 vs. AC
Hit: 1d8 + 4 damage, and the target takes ongoing 5 poison damage and cannot make opportunity attacks (save ends both).
Levels 11-30: 2d8 + 6 damage, and the target takes ongoing 10 poison damage and cannot make opportunity attacks (save ends both).

Soldiers

Binding Quills (poison) ✦ **Encounter**
Attack: Ranged 3 (one creature); level + 5 vs. AC
Hit: 1d8 + 4 damage, and the target takes ongoing 5 poison damage and is immobilized (save ends both).
Levels 11-30: 2d8 + 6 damage, and the target takes ongoing 10 poison damage and is immobilized (save ends both).

Devil-Bonding

Asmodeus rewards the most accomplished and loyal duergar warriors by ritually binding them to the soul of a barbazu (bearded devil). Barbazu-bonded duergar are among the fiercest warriors of their race.

Barbazu-Bonded Duergar Medium natural humanoid	**Level 10 Soldier** XP 500
HP 104; **Bloodied** 52	**Initiative** +11
AC 26, **Fortitude** 23, **Reflex** 22, **Will** 21	**Perception** +8
Speed 5	Darkvision
Resist 10 fire, 5 poison	
Traits	
Beard Tendrils ✦ **Aura** 1	
Any enemy that ends its turn in the aura takes 5 damage.	
Battle Frenzy	
While the duergar is bloodied, it gains a +2 bonus to attack rolls and deals 3 extra damage with its attacks.	
Standard Actions	
Glaive Hack (weapon) ✦ **At-Will**	
Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); +15 vs. AC	
Hit: 3d6 + 8 damage, and the target is marked until the end of the duergar's next turn.	
Glaive Sweep (weapon) ✦ **Recharge** ⚄ ⚅	
Attack: Close burst 2 (enemies in the burst); +15 vs. AC	
Hit: 2d6 + 7 damage.	
Minor Actions	
Infernal Quills (poison) ✦ **Encounter**	
Attack: Ranged 3 (one creature); +15 vs. AC	
Hit: 1d8 + 6 damage, and the target takes ongoing 5 poison damage and a -2 penalty to attack rolls (save ends both).	
Skills Athletics +15, Dungeoneering +13	
Str 21 (+10) **Dex** 18 (+9)	**Wis** 16 (+8)
Con 16 (+8) **Int** 13 (+6)	**Cha** 14 (+7)
Alignment evil	**Languages** Common, Deep Speech, Dwarven
Equipment chainmail, glaive	

The Greatest Gift

Asmodeus rewards his most deserving followers among the zharaak, dethikan, and klegesk castes with a faithful servitor that is also a powerful guardian. He creates this emberwrought homunculus using the recipient's blood and an ember from the lair of its devil lord.

Emberwrought Homunculus	**Level 12 Skirmisher**
Medium elemental animate (construct)	XP 700
HP 120; **Bloodied** 60	**Initiative** +14
AC 26, **Fortitude** 23, **Reflex** 26, **Will** 21	**Perception** +7
Speed 6	Darkvision
Immune disease, fire, poison, sleep; **Vulnerable** 10 cold	
Traits	
☼ **Asmodeus's Shield** ✦ **Aura** 2	
While the homunculus's master is in the aura, the master takes only half damage from melee attacks and ranged attacks.	
Standard Actions	
⊕ **Flaming Fist** (fire) ✦ **At-Will**	
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +17 vs. AC	
Hit: 3d8 + 4 fire damage.	
✧ **Swirling Embers** (fire) ✦ **Recharge** ⚅	
Attack: Close blast 3 (enemies in the blast); +15 vs. Reflex	
Hit: 1d8 + 4 fire damage, and ongoing 10 fire damage (save ends).	
Move Actions	
Speed of Flame ✦ **Recharge** ⚃ ⚄ ⚅	
Effect: The homunculus shifts up to half its speed, but must end the shift adjacent to its master.	
Triggered Actions	
↯ **Flaming Fury** ✦ **Encounter**	
Trigger: An enemy bloodies the homunculus's master.	
Effect (Free Action): The homunculus shifts up to its speed to a square adjacent to the triggering enemy and uses *flaming fist* against it.	
Str 15 (+8) **Dex** 22 (+12) **Wis** 13 (+7)	
Con 16 (+9) **Int** 8 (+5) **Cha** 3 (+2)	
Alignment unaligned **Languages** Deep Speech	

Duergar Settlements

Duergar settlements lie in the upper levels of the Underdark, called the Shallows. They are established near one another so that they can provide mutual support during hostilities. Some of these settlements, mines in particular, plunge far into the Deeps of the Underdark, but never so far as to render them indefensible.

All duergar settlements share the following qualities.

Fire Sources: All duergar settlements are located near volcanic activity. They might lie beneath or within great volcanoes, along the edges of lava flows, or near a chaos waste, an area where the Elemental Chaos has broken into the Underdark.

Strength of Stone: Duegar settlements consist of chambers of varying sizes carved from the surrounding rock. These chambers are linked by labyrinthine passageways that provide security in the form of defensive choke points and mazes of legendary complexity.

Sustenance: Like most ravagers, duergar rely on subjects and slaves to feed their masses. Myconid slaves manage vast, underground fungal forests on the duergar's behalf, and slaves tend herds of subterranean livestock to provide their masters with meat. The duergar also capture food and livestock on raids to the surface world, including animals that their new slaves are forced to drive into the depths. They are also known to augment their diets with the flesh of slaves that have outlived their usefulness.

Bastions of Stone, Flame, and Flesh

Duergar settlements vary widely in size. The smallest boast a few hundred duergar, along with slaves and guardian creatures. The greatest duergar citadels house thousands. Regardless of location and size, every duergar settlement boasts strong defenses.

Fortifications

Duergar protect their settlements with stone and flame, incorporating the following features.

Space: All permanent duergar citadels have a similar layout. Each is built around a voluminous central vault that is connected to smaller chambers by a maze of tunnels. The central grotto is reserved for the highest castes and also serves as a staging area for armies and raiding parties. Living spaces are concentrated in the smaller chambers. Tunnels act as the duergars' roadways and also delay and disorient attackers with their mazelike complexity. Space is never wasted; duergar dislike emptiness.

Natural Stone: The chamber at the heart of a duergar citadel is a natural, or mostly natural, vault. Surrounding chambers and tunnels follow the lines of natural cave systems. Duergar prefer to leave the stone in its natural condition wherever that's possible.

Crafted Stone: Though duergar prefer natural stone, the size and arrangement of natural caverns and tunnels seldom match what a community needs. Duergar are experts at crafting stone to suit their requirements. Stone lookout towers are carved into their central vaults; surrounding areas are honeycombed with crawlspaces and murder holes.

Lava Runs: Some duergar settlements are encircled by lava moats. Others are protected by lava falls that cascade across their entrance tunnels. These fiery cataracts are ensorcelled so that they cease their

flow when members of the dethikan or klegesk castes need to enter or exit.

Chasms: Duergar settlements occasionally emerge into gaping chasms that pierce the Deeps of the Underdark. Such pits frequently are inhabited by monsters, which the duergar either enslave or befriend and train to guard their borders.

Living Stone: Powerful duergar enchant naturally occurring pockets of living stone and use the material to construct tunnels, walls, and bridges that deter or even attack their enemies. Living stone is difficult to "tame." Only the greatest of the klegesk caste have mastered the ability to create the substance.

Traps

Duergar employ mundane and magical traps to protect their homes. Trapmakers work with stone, fire, and acid: familiar components to duergar. They do not shrink from employing weak slaves as bait to lure intruders into their dastardly devices.

The following traps are particularly suited to the duergar. They might be the size described in their entries, or the duergar might have built them up to enormous sizes over the centuries.

In *Dungeon Master's Guide:* caustic geyser (repurposed as a lava geyser), cave-in, field of everflame, flame jet, poisoned dart wall, and whirling blades.

In *Dungeon Master's Guide 2:* Crushing Walls Room, Elemental Tiles (acid, fire, and thunder), and Giant Rolling Boulder.

Guards

Humanoid slaves are employed alongside trained and enslaved monsters to guard Duergar strongholds. Arming slaves and teaching them to fight is potentially risky, but the duergar ensure obedience by spreading slaves out and limiting their ranks to the mentally broken.

Impermanent Settlements

Because their communities are isolated, duergar establish temporary settlements in defensible caverns or on underground islands to serve as staging areas and as fallback positions during slave raids or times of war against their neighbors. Such settlements are occupied for as long as needed, then abandoned when the duergar return home with their spoils.

Raid camps are rarely home to more than a few dozen duergar, their slaves, and their monster servants. Conversely, war camps might teem with up to five hundred duergar and their retinue.

ASSAULT THE SLAVER CARAVAN

Adventure Hook: The heroes encounter a small duergar slaver caravan heading out on a surface raid. The duergar might be defeated and their slaves freed if the heroes act quickly.

Level 6 Encounter (XP 1,226)
1 duergar raid leader (level 5 artillery)
2 duergar guards (level 4 soldier)
2 duergar scouts (level 4 lurker)
1 rage drake (level 5 brute)
4 orc savages (level 4 minion brute)

Duergar Mines

Duergar settlements are confined to the Shallows of the Underdark, but their mines sometimes descend into the Deeps in search of minerals and precious stones. Most mines are near duergar citadels, but large pockets of ore and gems are not always conveniently located; consequently, some mines are in remote locales, miles from the nearest duergar fortress.

Each mine is overseen by a member of the zharaak caste accompanied by a circle of guards and slavedrivers. It is not uncommon for slaves to outnumber their overseers, sometimes by a wide margin, but the laborers live in such fear and isolation that they seldom realize they might overwhelm their captors. Mortality in the mines is high, because the duergar care little for their workers' safety. Only the treasure matters.

The sounds of mining activity and the stench of dead slaves pervade duergar mines. Scavengers are drawn to the carrion, and predators always stalk the tunnels in search of lone or lost slaves. Characters can detect these telltale signs of duergar activity from up to a mile away with Dungeoneering checks; the DC should depend on the distance to the mine.

Duergar bloodmages serve as overseers at many duergar mines. These duergar harness their blood to bolster themselves and wreak pain and vengeance upon those that oppose them.

Duergar Bloodmage **Level 8 Controller**
Medium natural humanoid XP 350

HP 87; **Bloodied** 43 **Initiative** +6
AC 22, **Fortitude** 19, **Reflex** 21, **Will** 20 **Perception** +6
Speed 5 Darkvision
Resist 5 fire, 5 poison

Standard Actions

Quarterstaff (weapon) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +13 vs. AC
Hit: 2d8 + 7 damage.

Bleeding Eyes (implement, psychic) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Ranged 5 (one creature); +11 vs. Will
Hit: 2d6 + 4 psychic damage, and the target is blinded until the end of the bloodmage's next turn.

Boiling Blood (fire, implement) ✦ **Recharge** ⚄ ⁞⁞
Attack: Area burst 2 within 10 (creatures in the burst); +11 vs. Fortitude
Hit: 2d6 + 4 fire damage, and ongoing 5 fire damage (save ends).

Minor Actions

Infernal Quills (poison) ✦ **Encounter**
Attack: Ranged 3 (one creature); +13 vs. AC
Hit: 1d8 + 3 damage, and the target takes ongoing 5 poison damage and a –2 penalty to attack rolls (save ends both).

Blood Sacrifice ✦ **At-Will**
Effect: The bloodmage loses 5 hit points and chooses one of the following three effects.
1. The bloodmage gains a +4 power bonus to its next attack roll.
2. The bloodmage gains a +2 power bonus to all defenses until the end of its next turn.
3. The bloodmage shifts up to its speed.

Triggered Actions

Blazing Boils (fire, weapon) ✦ **Encounter**
Trigger: An adjacent enemy hits the bloodmage with a melee attack.
Attack (Immediate Reaction): Melee 1 (triggering enemy); +13 vs. AC
Hit: 2d8 + 5 fire damage, and the target is immobilized (save ends).
Effect: The bloodmage shifts up to 2 squares.

Skills Arcana +14, Bluff +12, Dungeoneering +11
Str 13 (+5) **Dex** 14 (+6) **Wis** 14 (+6)
Con 15 (+6) **Int** 20 (+9) **Cha** 17 (+7)
Alignment evil **Languages** Common, Deep Speech, Dwarven
Equipment robes, quarterstaff

THWART THE MINERS

Adventure Hook: The heroes travel to what they think is an abandoned mine deep underground to recover a lost artifact. When they arrive, they discover a pair of duergar that are also seeking the artifact, along with their slaves and a trained bulette.

Level 9 Encounter (XP 2,250)
1 duergar bloodmage (level 8 controller)
1 barbazu-bonded duergar (level 10 soldier)
1 bulette (level 9 elite skirmisher)
8 human thugs (level 7 minion skirmisher)

Firebonded Citadels

The largest duergar settlements are their firebonded citadels, which are home to thousands of inhabitants.

A firebonded citadel is always located near volcanic activity. Duergar use the flowing lava to fuel their forges and to warm their homes. Elaborate networks of carved troughs and sluice tunnels carry lava to every corner of the settlement.

Heroes hoping to infiltrate one of these fortified cities are likely to spend days trying to overcome its considerable defenses. Mazes of peripheral tunnels, designed to thwart intruders, are defended by guards and well maintained traps. Duergar captains watch over these devices and move quickly to eliminate intruders who are weakened or ensnared by traps.

The vast citadels are also surrounded by lookout posts that provide early warning of impending attack. Scouts range throughout the defensive works and even patrol beyond the citadel's defensive zone on occasion. If detected, infiltrators are quickly met by scores, possibly hundreds, of duergar bent on destroying intruders.

Firebonded citadels are protected by an elite force of mounted duergar warriors. These wily riders forge a special bond with their howler mounts (usually howler doom mastiffs) and act in near-perfect concert with them. These rider-mount pairs are also encountered at duergar unholy sites and towering flames (both described below).

Duergar Howler Rider **Level 13 Skirmisher**
Medium natural humanoid XP 800

HP 131; **Bloodied** 65 **Initiative** +14
AC 27, **Fortitude** 23, **Reflex** 25, **Will** 22 **Perception** +9
Speed 5 Darkvision
Resist 10 fire, 10 poison

Standard Actions

⊕ **Warhammer** (weapon) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +18 vs. AC
Hit: 2d10 + 10 damage.

⸸ **Quick Strike** ✦ **At-Will**
Effect: The howler rider uses *warhammer* and can shift up to 3 squares before or after the attack.

Minor Actions

↛ **Infernal Quills** (poison) ✦ **Encounter**
Attack: Ranged 3 (one creature); +18 vs. AC
Hit: 2d8 + 5 damage, and the target takes ongoing 10 poison damage and a -2 penalty to attack rolls (save ends both).

Quick Mount/Dismount ✦ **At-Will** (1/round)
Effect: The howler rider mounts or dismounts its adjacent mount.

Triggered Actions

⸸ **Retributive Strike** (weapon) ✦ **Encounter**
Trigger: An adjacent enemy hits the howler rider or its mount with an attack.
Attack (Immediate Reaction): Melee 1 (triggering enemy); +16 vs. Fortitude
Hit: 2d10 + 10 damage, and the howler rider pushes the target up to 2 squares and knocks it prone.

Shield Mount ✦ **Recharge** ⚄ ⚅
Trigger: The howler rider's mount takes damage while the rider is on it.
Effect (Immediate Interrupt): The howler rider takes the damage instead.

Skills Acrobatics +17, Athletics +12, Dungeoneering +14
Str 13 (+7) **Dex** 22 (+12) **Wis** 17 (+9)
Con 19 (+10) **Int** 15 (+8) **Cha** 12 (+7)
Alignment evil **Languages** Abyssal, Common, Deep Speech, Dwarven
Equipment studded leather armor, warhammer

Unholy Sites

Duergar religious sites are tied to the race's heritage as former slaves. Many of the sites are shrines to Asmodeus or other devils that aided the duergar in ages past. Others are the locations of great battles where a powerful mind flayer onslaught was rebuffed. In some cases, major duergar settlements grew around areas of religious importance. Other shrines are found in isolated locales.

Klegesk members sanctify these sites, using dark rituals to mark them as holy to the duergar race. When duergar rise in caste, they undertake personal pilgrimages to nearby sites. There they give thanks for their new positions by spending a day fasting and communing with their fellows.

FOIL THE DARK RITUAL

Adventure Hook: The heroes learn that two powerful duergar have traveled to a long-forgotten unholy site of the duergar people in order to call upon Asmodeus to imbue them with greater power. After the heroes overcome the shrine's considerable defenses, they discover the duergar pair preparing to conduct their fell ritual.

Level 12 Encounter (XP 4700)
1 duergar blackguard (level 13 elite soldier)
1 emberwrought homunculus (level 12 skirmisher)
1 duergar howler rider (level 13 skirmisher) and mount (level 13 skirmisher)
1 howler doom mastiff (level 13 skirmisher)

Each site is overseen by a dethikan or klegesk duergar of at least 10th level, along with his or her personal retinue of advisors and slaves. The duergar utilize their strongest warriors and trained monsters to guard these important sites.

The Towering Flames

Towering flames are enormous fortresses crafted from immense, vertical rock formations that occur in vast underground chasms. They are the seats of power for the entire duergar race, where the strongest and most devious rule. Thirteen towering flames exist. Most are located in the centers of fire-bonded citadels, but a few lie in distant parts of the Underdark.

The walls of a towering flame, both within and without, are sheathed in magical, everburning fire. A creature that starts its turn adjacent to such a flaming wall takes ongoing 5 fire damage (save ends).

Each towering flame is home to a klegesk caste duergar of at least 14th level, an extensive retinue of guards, advisors, and slaves, and a personal army of at least two hundred duergar, countless slaves, and trained monsters.

About the Author

Craig A. Campbell became a Dungeons & Dragons® player 20 years ago. Over the years, he has written for the RPGA, *D&D Insider*, and *Dragon* and *Dungeon* online. This article marks his twentieth published work for the game he loves.

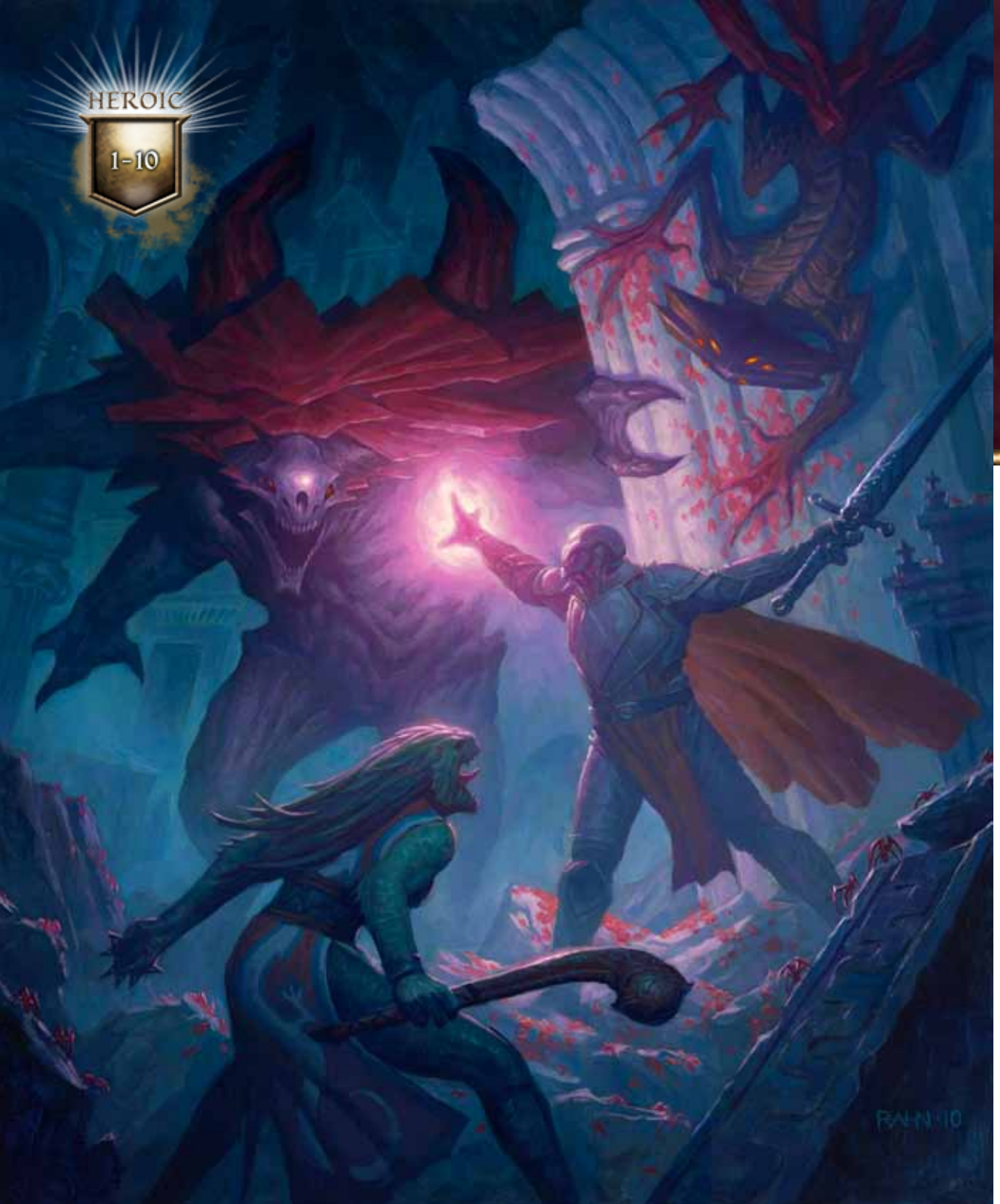
Updated March 3, 2011

PREVENT A SURFACE ONSLAUGHT

Adventure Hook: A duergar infernal consort residing in a remote towering flame has recently won a battle against a drow settlement near the surface. This duergar intends to enslave the remaining drow and lead them on a raid against an unsuspecting aboveground town. The heroes have the chance to prevent the surface raid before it begins.

After defeating or making their way past multiple groups of fleeing drow, as well as perimeter duergar scouts and guard parties, they come upon the infernal consort, his personal guard, an enormous carrion crawler pet (which is cleaning up the battlefield), and the consort's volcanic dragon ally.

Level 16 Encounter (XP 7200)
1 duergar infernal consort (level 17 controller)
1 adult volcanic dragon (level 15 elite brute)
1 carrion crawler putrefier (level 15 soldier)
4 devil-bred duergar (level 18 minion soldier)



Andok Sur

By Bill Slavicsek

An adventure for characters of levels 3-8

Illustration by Chris Rahn ✦ Cartography by Jason A. Engle

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Andok Sur, an ancient necropolis in the Nentir Vale's northeastern reaches, was introduced in the Dungeons & Dragons® *novel* The Mark of Nerath. *If you haven't already read this novel, be warned that there are spoilers ahead. Proceed at your own risk!*

This adventure locale features two encounters that you can use in any D&D campaign setting. The necropolis is equally well suited to the Chaos Scar, the Realms, Eberron, Athas, or your home campaign. It is designed for characters of levels 3-8 to explore, but can easily be adjusted upward to challenge characters of higher levels.

Beyond the storm-shrouded peak of Thunderspire Mountain, hidden beneath the desolate reaches of the Old Hills, the necropolis of Andok Sur rests in eternal slumber. At least, it had been resting until the lich Magroth entered the entombed site and attempted to raise an army of undead. Though Magroth failed, Andok Sur remains active, lending new dangers to the Old Hills and the surrounding areas.

History

Andok Sur was ancient when the empire of Bael Turath was merely a collection of loosely allied city-states. The place was established by the warrior tribes of the Eastern Valley, and dedicated to the demon prince Orcus. Andok Sur began as an aboveground site where warrior tribes interred their still-living enemies. Tombs and mausoleums filled the necropolis as houses fill a town. Eventually, the vampire lord Zarguna turned the place into a vibrant City of the Dead, and the shadowy hand of Andok Sur commanded almost all of the eastern Vale.

As Orcus's City of the Dead grew in size and power, it finally garnered the attention of other influential agencies, including the growing empires of Bael Turath and Arkhosia, as well as the nearby dwarven empire of Mithralfast. Even divine powers saw Andok Sur as a threat to the natural world—a threat they could not abide. At the height of the city's power, a great earthquake rocked the Old Hills. In an instant, the City of the Dead was shattered. It fell into the earth and was buried, to be forgotten by time and history.

Until now.

Weeks ago, the vampire lich Magroth opened the way into the buried City of the Dead. There, he attempted to complete a ritual to raise the undead hordes and restore Andok Sur to its former glory. Thanks to the intervention of a group of adventurers and an agent of the Raven Queen, Magroth failed. However, the magic he did unleash awakened some of those interred within the buried necropolis. Those undead now pursue sinister plans of their own.

At the same time, the newly reopened Andok Sur was the site at which the Abyssal plague first entered the world. Along with the awakened undead, the necropolis holds a special significance to those blighted by this demonic infection from another plane of existence.

The Old Hills

The Old Hills cover a large portion of the northeastern section of the Nentir Vale, bordered by the Trade Road to the south and Lake Nen to the north. They roll away from Thunderspire Mountain to the southwest, and eventually rise into the Dawnforge Mountains to the east. Ravines and depressions crisscross the land, the worn hills forming walls that give the otherwise open country a feeling of oppressiveness and confinement.

Various threats roam the Old Hills and the surrounding environs, including bandits, goblin and kobold tribes, giant spiders, drakes, and the occasional drow or duergar raiding party from the depths of Thunderspire. With the opening of Andok Sur, undead creatures have emerged to wander the land. Zombies, skeletons, and ghouls are the most common, but wights, wraiths, ghosts, and even the rare vampire have been seen.

Walking or riding into the Old Hills from the base of Thunderspire leads to a relatively new feature of the area. A gaping hole in the earth shows where part of the hillside collapsed into the ground. The sinkhole opens to reveal a huge cavern containing the sunken city of Andok Sur.

The Sunken Necropolis

When the earth split apart and swallowed Andok Sur, it took the entire City of the Dead. After the dust settled and the shaking stopped, nothing remained upon the surface to even hint that the ancient city had once stood there. The necropolis collapsed into the great cavern beneath the ground, breaking apart and settling at different levels. Canted streets and oddly tilted stone buildings loom like a mad landscape in the darkness beneath the hillside. Simple stone vaults, engraved tombs, and elaborate mausoleums fill the levels of the cavern. Cobbled paths wind between the structures, and statues dedicated to Orcus and other demonic entities rise here and there among the wreckage.

Some sections of the necropolis appear basically intact, aside from an odd slant to the ground and the weeds and fungi covering many of the surfaces. In other parts, the cobbled path is shattered and the tombs are cracked and broken, or even collapsed completely due to the savage nature of the disaster. Those vaults that remain more or less undamaged are sealed by heavy stone doors decorated with carvings honoring Orcus and undeath.

The huge cavern remains dark. Little light from the opening above reaches into the depths of the necropolis. The place is as cold as a grave, veiled in a cloak of penetrating evil that even the most desensitized adventurers can't help but notice as they explore the broken city. In some places, the stone structures stand close together and lean in upon the paths. In others, large mausoleums occupy relatively open spaces. In the center of the cavern, a great temple dedicated to Orcus stands in almost pristine condition. If a visitor didn't know any better, he or she might believe that the grand and disturbing structure was built within the cavern, not dropped down from high above.

Though much of the necropolis remains gripped in the sleep of death, some inhabitants were reanimated by the actions of Magroth, and more rise from their slumber every day. Skeletons and zombies remain the most common wanderers, shambling through the dark shadows without discernible purpose or destination. Ghouls and other more intelligent undead, however, have returned to the surface with ambitions that spill beyond the necropolis and into the world above.

Adventurers and Andok Sur

Adventurers might explore the necropolis for a variety of reasons. They might seek to discover the source of the undead threatening the Trade Road and the surrounding countryside. They might want to find ancient treasure or a lost artifact supposedly entombed within the City of the Dead. Or they could be searching for clues to the origin of the Abyssal plague and the changes wrought in the green dragon Vestapalk by the demonic infection.

These are just a few of the hooks that might send a party of adventurers into the cold, dark depths of Andok Sur. The following encounters could serve as the basis for a longer adventure of your own creation.

Characters who succeed on the indicated skill checks can gain the following information.

Dungeoneering DC 9: A disaster buried this necropolis long ago. Some of the structures are unstable, and portions of even the slanted and multitiered streets might even collapse at any moment.

History DC 21 (trained only): The distinctive architectural style and the ornate, demonic decorations mark this as the necropolis of Andok Sur. A character who succeeds on this check knows the basics of the information presented on page 2 under "History."

Encounter 1: Streets of the Dead

Encounter Level 3 (800 XP)

Whether the adventurers use ropes, spells, or some other method to descend into the huge cavern beneath the hillside, eventually they reach one of Andok Sur's many streets of the dead. This particular area didn't survive the original disaster or the intervening centuries in pristine shape. Many of the tombs that once lined this boulevard are shattered or in ill repair, and a great chasm splits part of the cobblestone path. A massive iron gate seals off the street. It's heavy and takes effort to force open, but it is unlocked. When the adventurers push through it into this area, they find that the ruins are overrun with shambling undead.

Setup

2 flesh-crazed zombies (Z)
3 grasping zombies (G)
6 decrepit skeletons (S)

This encounter works well as a first experience within the confines of Andok Sur.

When the adventurers approach the gate, read:
A pair of heavy iron doors hangs slightly askew and partially open. Intricate decorations cover the doors, showing demonic scenes and symbols of death and undeath.

Characters can make checks to examine the door or hear sounds coming from the other side.

Religion DC 13: The character recognizes the iconography used to decorate the necropolis as symbols used by followers of Orcus, the Demon Prince of the Undead.

Passive Perception 13: Characters with passive Perception of 13 or higher hear shambling footfalls and the rattle of bones beyond the gate.

When the adventurers step through the gate, read:
A ruined boulevard stretches before you. Small structures of stone and bone once lined each side of the cobblestone street, but most of them have collapsed into broken heaps of debris. A few remain mostly intact. These consist of bones that have somehow, without mortar or supports, been fused into huts or small tombs. A wide crack splits the street ahead of you, and two separate piles of skulls rest at the far end of the broken ground. Beyond the skulls, a gargantuan globe of ghost-blue light swirls and radiates in the oppressive darkness.

The adventurers must pass through this street of the dead to get deeper into the necropolis. The globe of ghost light (see "Features of the Area") augments the undead that roam this area. The skeletons and zombies are drawn to the bright life radiating from the living adventurers.

Tactics

The flesh-crazed zombies begin the encounter hidden within the rubble to each side of the ghost light. The skeletons begin within two of the bone tombs. The grasping zombies lie in wait within the ruins.

The decrepit skeletons emerge from the bone tombs on their initiative. Two skeletons draw their longswords and charge the nearest living creatures. The remaining four skeletons use their shortbows to make ranged attacks. The bow-wielding skeletons switch to their longswords only when adventurers close on them. Skeletons shift before attacking whenever possible.

The grasping zombies shamble out of the ruins to engage the adventurers. They attempt to fight within the ghost light's aura of entropy, but they can easily be drawn away as the battle intensifies. If a zombie grabs a target, it tries to pull him or her deeper into the ghost light.

The flesh-crazed zombies wait until the weaker monsters have engaged the adventurers before they enter the fray. They charge at every opportunity, but then fall back to once again take advantage of the ghost light's aura.

All of these undead fight until they are destroyed.

Development

If the ghost light is extinguished, the undead in this area eventually wander off. If the adventurers remain here, the creatures continue attacking them, drawn to their life force.

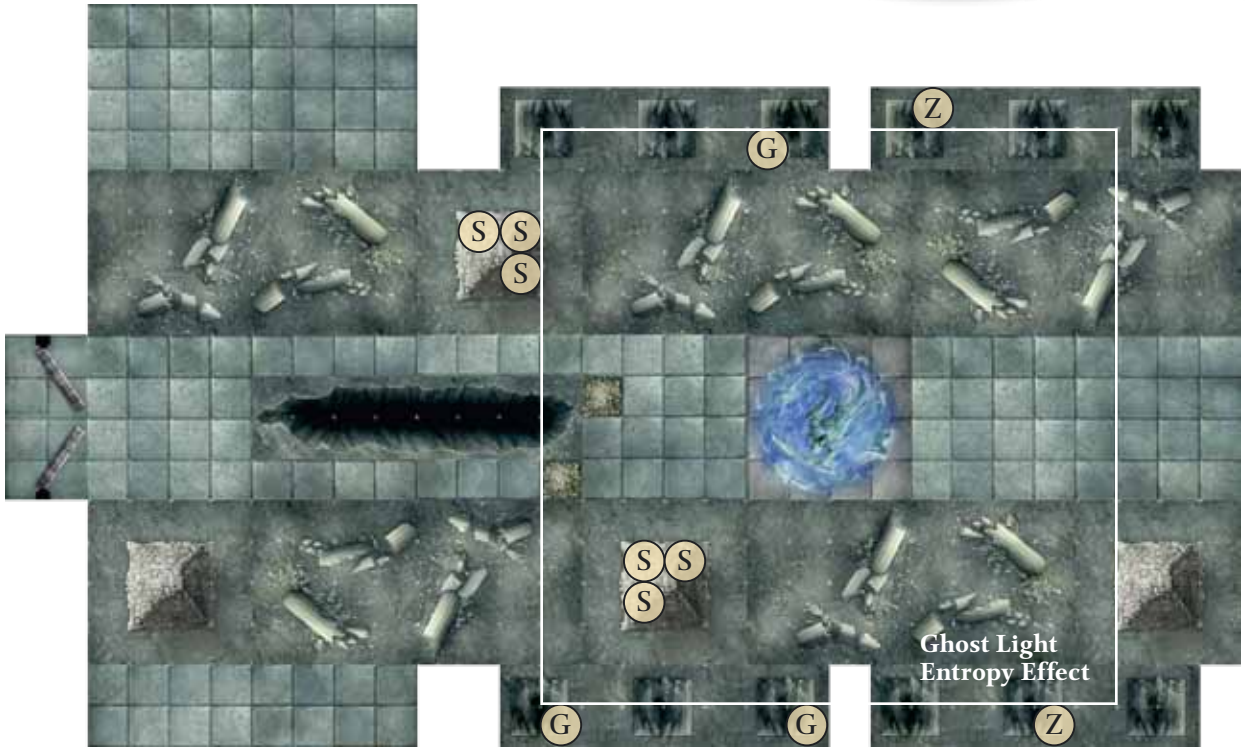
If the ghost light remains active, additional decrepit skeletons might arrive to join the battle later in the encounter. When two or fewer decrepit skeletons remain, roll a d20 at the beginning of their turn. On a roll of 16–20, 1d4 + 1 additional decrepit skeletons enter the area and join the fight. They arrive on the far end of the map and move toward the ghost light before engaging the adventurers with bows and swords.

Features of the Area

Illumination: The ghost light sheds dim light to a distance of 10 squares in all directions. The rest of the area is cloaked in darkness.

Ghost Light: The ghost light radiates entropy in an aura 5. Living creatures in the aura take a –2 penalty to attack rolls, and undead in it gain a +2 bonus to attack rolls. The ghost light can be extinguished by scattering both skull piles (see below). If one skull pile is scattered, the aura of entropy is reduced in size to an aura 3.

Skull Piles: Two small pyramids of neatly stacked skulls, standing about 3 feet high, rest near the edge of the ghost light's aura. The two piles serve as anchors for the ghost light. If the skull piles are scattered, the ghost light is extinguished. A creature can spend a minor action to make a Strength check (DC 10) to scatter one of the enchanted piles of skulls. A DC 15 Arcana or Religion check can instead be used to scatter a pile and disrupt its magic, also as a minor action.



Crevice: The crevice that splits the street is 20 feet deep. Any creature that falls in takes 2d10 falling damage. Climbing the side of the pit requires a DC 15 Athletics check.

Ruined Tombs: The remains of the tombs that once lined this street are difficult terrain.

Treasure

The tomb nearest the ghost light contains a *+1 vicious weapon* of your choice and a decaying pack filled with 400 gp.

2 Flesh-Crazed Zombies (Z) **Level 4 Skirmisher**
Medium natural animate (undead) XP 175 each

HP 55; **Bloodied** 27 **Initiative** +6
AC 18, **Fortitude** 17, **Reflex** 16, **Will** 14 **Perception** +3
Speed 6 (8 when charging) Darkvision
Immune disease, poison

Traits

Flesh-Crazed Charge
While the zombie is charging, its movement does not provoke opportunity attacks.

Zombie Weakness
A critical hit automatically reduces the zombie to 0 hit points.

Standard Actions

Club (weapon) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +9 vs. AC
Hit: 1d8 + 6 damage, or 2d8 + 6 if the zombie charged the target.

Bite ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +9 vs. AC
Hit: 2d6 + 5 damage, and the target is dazed until the end of the zombie's next turn.

Triggered Actions

Deathless Hunger ✦ **Encounter**
Trigger: The zombie is reduced to 0 hit points, but not by a critical hit.
Effect (No Action): Roll a d20. On a 15 or higher, the zombie is instead reduced to 1 hit point.

Str 18 (+6)	**Dex** 15 (+4)	**Wis** 13 (+3)
Con 15 (+4)	**Int** 1 (-3)	**Cha** 3 (-2)

Alignment unaligned **Languages** –
Equipment club

3 Grasping Zombies (G) **Level 1 Brute**
Medium natural animate (undead) XP 100 each

HP 33; **Bloodied** 16 **Initiative** -1
AC 13, **Fortitude** 14, **Reflex** 11, **Will** 11 **Perception** -1
Speed 4 Darkvision
Immune disease, poison

Traits

Zombie Weakness
A critical hit automatically reduces the zombie to 0 hit points.

Standard Actions

Slam ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +6 vs. AC
Hit: 1d12 + 3 damage, or 1d12 + 8 against a grabbed target.

Zombie Grasp ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +4 vs. Reflex
Hit: The zombie grabs the target (escape DC 12) if it does not have a creature grabbed.

Triggered Actions

Deathless Hunger ✦ **Encounter**
Trigger: The zombie is reduced to 0 hit points, but not by a critical hit.
Effect (No Action): Roll a d20. On a 15 or higher, the zombie is instead reduced to 1 hit point.

Str 16 (+3)	**Dex** 8 (-1)	**Wis** 8 (-1)
Con 13 (+1)	**Int** 1 (-5)	**Cha** 3 (-4)

Alignment unaligned **Languages** –

6 Decrepit Skeletons (S) **Level 1 Minion Skirmisher**
Medium natural animate (undead) XP 25 each

HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion. **Initiative** +5
AC 16, **Fortitude** 13, **Reflex** 14, **Will** 13 **Perception** +2
Speed 6 Darkvision
Immune disease, poison; **Resist** 10 necrotic; **Vulnerable** 5 radiant

Standard Actions

Longsword (weapon) ✦ **At-Will**
Effect: The skeleton can shift 1 square before the attack.
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +6 vs. AC
Hit: 4 damage.

Shortbow (weapon) ✦ **At-Will**
Effect: The skeleton can shift 1 square before the attack.
Attack: Ranged 20 (one creature); +6 vs. AC
Hit: 3 damage.

Str 15 (+2)	**Dex** 17 (+3)	**Wis** 14 (+2)
Con 13 (+1)	**Int** 3 (-4)	**Cha** 3 (-4)

Alignment unaligned **Languages** –
Equipment longsword, shortbow, 20 arrows

Encounter 2: The Hidden Chamber

Encounter Level 8 (1,900 XP)

Setup

Vrikus, ghoul boss (V)
3 ghouls (G)
2 ravenous ghouls (R)
5 plague demon chaos hounds (H)
1 plague demon chaos bender (B)

A winding cavern tunnel leads into a collapsed chamber. An ambitious ghoul dwelling there seeks power to help it solidify its hold over a portion of the necropolis.

When the adventurers reach the end of the tunnel, read:

The winding tunnel takes you toward the depths of the cavern, eventually opening into a wide chamber. Four stone mausoleums stand within, two on each side of a ruined pavilion that has been reduced to just shattered and fallen pillars. Holes have been hastily dug throughout the chamber. On the far side, ghouls labor around two freshly dug holes.

One of the ghouls looks up and sniffs the air. "I smell food, boys," it snarls. "Let's have dinner!"

The elite ghoul Vrikus wants to rule the entire necropolis. It has made a good start by consolidating its hold over a gang of ghouls, but it seeks more power to help it meet its goal. To this end, it has led a small band to this deep chamber, where the strange and mysterious Abyssal plague transformed the green dragon Vestapalk. Vrikus doesn't know what triggered the green dragon's transformation, but it believes that the magic is hidden somewhere within the chamber.

Tactics

The ghouls begin the encounter huddled around two of the freshly dug holes on the far end of the chamber. Vrikus immediately senses the arrival of the adventurers and orders its ghouls to attack.

The soldier ghouls stride forward to engage the adventurers. They try to lock down any defenders and strikers.

The ravenous ghouls rush in to attack any adventurers the soldiers immobilize. If no enemies are immobilized, they go after any leaders and controllers in the back ranks.

Vrikus wanders the battlefield, barking orders to its ravenous crew. It moves into large groups of adventurers to get a better chance at using *cruel bite*.

Development

At the start of the third round of combat, roll initiative for the plague demons. On their initiative, they drop down from unseen cracks in the ceiling. The plague demons attack the back ranks of the adventurers, seeking to infect living hosts with Abyssal plague before turning their attention upon the ghouls.

The plague demons have been drawn to this spot, the origin point of the Abyssal plague's entry into this world. They have come here on instinct, for no real purpose other than to satisfy the pull emanating from the place. Finding living hosts to infect is just a happy coincidence.

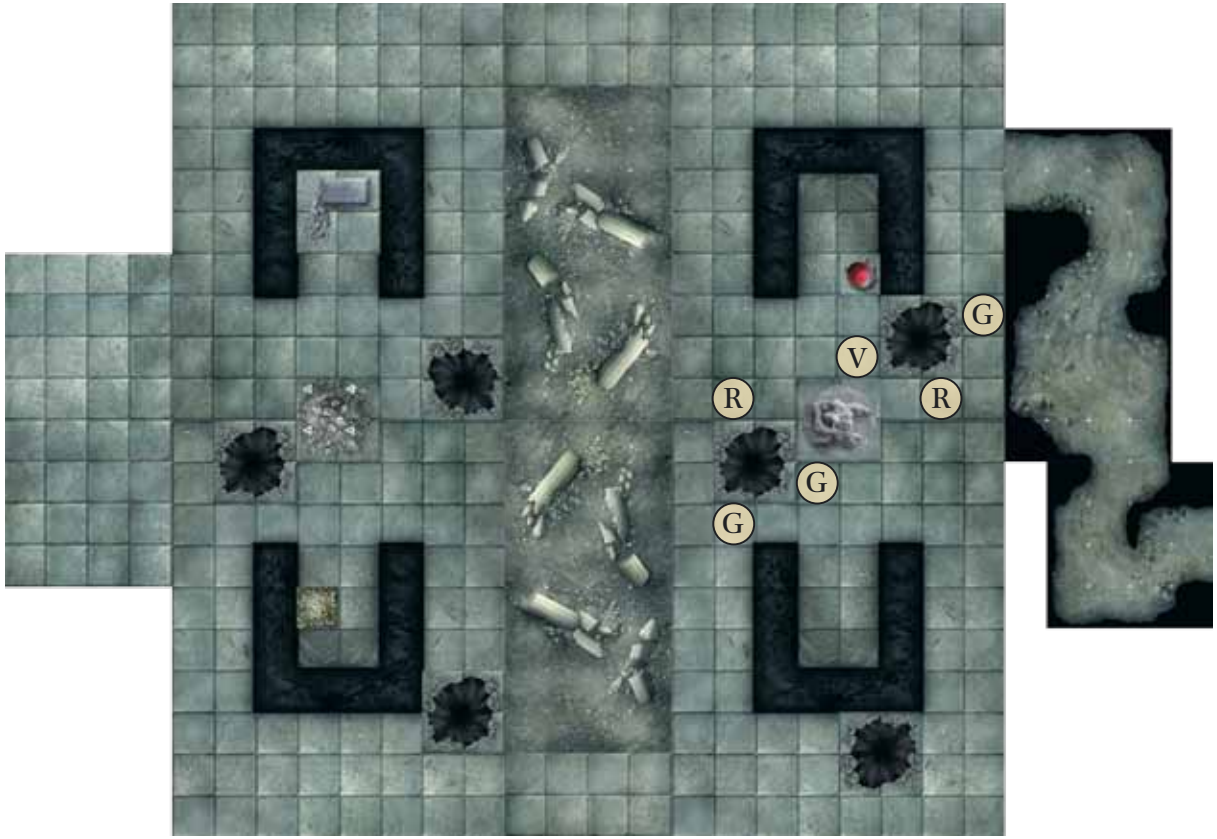
Features of the Area

Illumination: Darkness.

Holes: Each hole is 10 feet deep. Any creature that falls into a hole takes 1d10 falling damage. Note that the holes contain nothing of interest. Vrikus and his band are looking for a source of magic that doesn't exist. Climbing out of a hole requires a DC 15 Athletics check.

Ruined Pavilion: The remains of the pillars are difficult terrain.

Mausoleums: The bodies once sealed within the stone mausoleums have since risen as undead and wandered to other parts of the necropolis. A search of the basin in the vault at the upper right of the map uncovers two 500 gp gems. A +2 *magic implement* of your choice sits upon the sarcophagus in the mausoleum at the lower right of the map.



3 Ghouls (G)	**Level 5 Soldier**
Medium natural humanoid (undead)	XP 200 each
HP 63; **Bloodied** 31	**Initiative** +8
AC 21, **Fortitude** 17, **Reflex** 19, **Will** 16	**Perception** +2
Speed 8, climb 4	Darkvision
Immune disease, poison; **Resist** 10 necrotic	

Traits

Weakened Paralysis

Whenever the ghoul takes radiant damage, one creature immobilized or stunned by the ghoul can make a saving throw against one of those effects.

Standard Actions

⊕ Claws ✦ At-Will

Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +10 vs. AC

Hit: 2d6 + 6 damage, and the target is immobilized (save ends).

⸸ Ghoulish Bite ✦ At-Will

Attack: Melee 1 (one immobilized, restrained, stunned, or unconscious creature); +10 vs. AC

Hit: 4d6 + 6 damage, and the target is stunned (save ends).

Skills Stealth +11

Str 14 (+4)	**Dex** 19 (+6)	**Wis** 11 (+2)
Con 15 (+4)	**Int** 10 (+2)	**Cha** 12 (+3)

Alignment chaotic evil **Languages** Common

Vrikus, Ghoul Boss (V)	**Level 5 Elite Soldier**
Medium natural humanoid (undead)	XP 400
HP 126; **Bloodied** 63	**Initiative** +8
AC 21, **Fortitude** 17, **Reflex** 19, **Will** 16	**Perception** +2
Speed 8, climb 4	Darkvision
Immune disease, poison; **Resist** 10 necrotic	
Saving Throw +2; **Action Points** 1	

Traits

Weakened Paralysis

Whenever the ghoul takes radiant damage, one creature immobilized or stunned by the ghoul can make a saving throw against one of those effects.

Standard Actions

⊕ Claws ✦ At-Will

Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +10 vs. AC

Hit: 2d6 + 6 damage, and the target is immobilized (save ends).

⸸ Double Attack ✦ At-Will

Effect: Vrikus uses *claws* twice.

⸸ Ghoulish Bite ✦ At-Will

Attack: Melee 1 (one immobilized, restrained, stunned, or unconscious creature); +10 vs. AC

Hit: 4d6 + 6 damage, and the target is stunned (save ends).

Triggered Actions

⸸ Cruel Bite ✦ Recharge ⚄ ⁞⁞

Trigger: An enemy adjacent to Vrikus uses and attack power that doesn't include Vrikus as a target.

Effect (Immediate Interrupt): Vrikus uses *ghoulish bite* against the triggering enemy, even if that enemy isn't immobilized, restrained, stunned, or unconscious.

Skills Intimidate +8, Stealth +11

Str 14 (+4)	**Dex** 19 (+6)	**Wis** 11 (+2)
Con 15 (+4)	**Int** 11 (+2)	**Cha** 13 (+3)

Alignment chaotic evil **Languages** Common

Abyssal Plague **Level 8 Disease**

Those infected by this disease slowly develop oozing sores, blisters, and growths of crimson crystal laced with veins of silver and flecks of gold.

Stage 0: The target recovers from the disease.

Stage 1: While affected by stage 1, the target exhibits sores and growths across 10 percent of the body and loses a healing surge.

Stage 2: While affected by stage 2, the target has sores and growths over 50 percent of the body and loses a healing surge. The target also takes a -2 penalty to AC, Fortitude, and Reflex, and is slowed.

Check (Stage 1 or Stage 2): At the end of each extended rest, the target makes an Endurance check if it is at stage 1 or 2.
11 or Lower: The stage of the disease increases by 1.
12-15: No change.
16 or Higher: The stage of the disease decreases by 1.

Stage 3: While affected by stage 3, the target has sores and growths over 90 percent of the body. The target also takes a -2 penalty to AC, Fortitude, and Reflex, and is slowed. In addition, the target becomes increasingly disoriented and chaotic as the demonic nature of the disease takes hold.

Check (Stage 3): At the end of each extended rest, the target makes an Endurance check if it is at stage 3.
11 or Lower: The target dies.
12-23: No change.
24 or Higher: The target transforms into a plague demon chaos beast.

2 Ravenous Ghouls (R) **Level 5 Brute**
Medium natural humanoid (undead) XP 200 each

HP 76; **Bloodied** 38 **Initiative** +4
AC 17, **Fortitude** 18, **Reflex** 17, **Will** 15 **Perception** +1
Speed 8, climb 4 Darkvision
Immune disease, poison; **Resist** 10 necrotic; **Vulnerable** 5 radiant

Standard Actions

⊕ **Claws ✦ At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +10 vs. AC
Hit: 3d8 + 4 damage.

⸸ **Ravenous Bite ✦ Recharge** ⚄ ⚅
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +10 vs. AC
Hit: 3d8 + 6 damage, and ongoing 5 damage (save ends).

Skills Stealth +9
Str 18 (+6) **Dex** 14 (+4) **Wis** 8 (+1)
Con 16 (+5) **Int** 8 (+1) **Cha** 13 (+3)
Alignment chaotic evil **Languages** Common

5 Plague Demon Chaos Hounds (H) **Level 5 Minion Skirmisher**
Medium elemental beast (demon) XP 50 each

HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion. **Initiative** +7
AC 19, **Fortitude** 18, **Reflex** 17, **Will** 15 **Perception** +3
Speed 8 Darkvision

Traits

Pack Attack
The plague demon's attacks deal 2 extra damage for each other plague demon that is adjacent to the target.

Standard Actions

⊕ **Bite** (disease) **✦ At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +10 vs. AC
Hit: 5 damage, and the plague demon can shift 1 square. At the end of the encounter, the target makes a saving throw. On a failure, the target contracts Abyssal plague (stage 1).

Str 18 (+6) **Dex** 16 (+5) **Wis** 12 (+3)
Con 18 (+6) **Int** 5 (-1) **Cha** 10 (+2)
Alignment chaotic evil **Languages** –

Plague Demon Chaos Bender (B) **Level 6 Controller**
Large elemental beast (demon) XP 250

HP 72; **Bloodied** 36 **Initiative** +8
AC 20, **Fortitude** 17, **Reflex** 19, **Will** 18 **Perception** +7
Speed 8 Darkvision

Traits

☼ **Chaotic Field ✦ Aura** 2
Whenever any enemy ends its turn in the aura, the plague demon slides it up to 2 squares as a free action.

Standard Actions

⊕ **Bite** (disease) **✦ At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +11 vs. AC
Hit: 2d6 + 7 damage. At the end of the encounter, the target makes a saving throw. On a failure, the target contracts Abyssal plague (stage 1).

✧ **Frenzy of Claws ✦ At-Will**
Attack: Close burst 1 (enemies in the burst); +9 vs. Reflex
Hit: 1d6 + 2 damage, and the target is slowed and takes ongoing 5 damage (save ends both).

Triggered Actions

Variable Resistance ✦ 2/Encounter
Trigger: The plague demon takes acid, cold, fire, lightning, or thunder damage.
Effect (Free Action): The plague demon gains resist 5 to the triggering damage type until the end of the encounter or until it uses *variable resistance* again.

Str 17 (+6) **Dex** 20 (+8) **Wis** 18 (+7)
Con 16 (+6) **Int** 6 (+1) **Cha** 12 (+4)
Alignment chaotic evil **Languages** –

About the Author

Bill Slavicsek is the R&D Director for Dungeons & Dragons® games and novels at Wizards of the Coast. His recent design credits include *The Mark of Nerath* novel, the *D&D Castle Ravenloft* board game, *Heroes of the Fallen Lands*, and *Heroes of the Forgotten Kingdoms*, among others.

Intriguing

by Stephen Radney-MacFarland
Illustration by Steve Ellis

Last month, we started to investigate how you can challenge more than stats in your Dungeons & Dragons® game. Don't get me wrong—combat is fantastically fun, and you can run a perfectly good game by staging one combat after another. But eventually, every DM looks at his or her game and wonders how to add other types of dramatic challenges. One particular element of drama that has always been popular in roleplaying games, and probably will become more so with the upcoming release of the *Game of Thrones* series on HBO, is intrigue.

Intrigue might seem difficult to implement, or to implement well, in a D&D game. The Insight skill and a host of rituals make it possible for adventurers to gain sensitive information easily, and it's hard to maintain a sense of intrigue when everyone knows what's going on. After all, the whole point of intrigue is keeping people from knowing *what's going on*. But with a few simple steps, you can maintain intrigue without taking anything away from the characters.

It's Secret

Secrets are the heart of intrigue. Last month, I presented a couple of tricks to help you get to know your players and how they differ from their characters. The last question in the character questionnaire asked about the character's greatest secret. The answer to this question is a great way to gauge how receptive your players will be to an intrigue game. Answers such as "he has an extra toe," or the even less helpful "my character has no secrets," can give you a clue that the player is not interested in intrigue. A lack of interest is even more likely if the same player has a high slayer or power gamer rating.

But other players probably gave you complicated secrets: stories of proverbial or actual skeletons in their character's closet, or the possibility of noble bastardry, or strange creatures that speak to them in dreams. Not only will they be receptive to intrigue, they are basically crying out for it.

Intrigue is all about secrets. As with a good spy novel, few things are as they first seem, everyone has an agenda, and few people tell the full truth without prompting.

The biggest pitfall to avoid is taking intrigue too far. Like any bumbling criminal, tt's easy to trap yourself in your own web of lies, clues, and wheels within wheels of misinformation. To avoid this common mistake with your first attempt at intrigue—designing wheels within wheels right from the start—I advise that you use another tactic.

Simple and Active Intrigues

To get started, you can use a form of the character questionnaire in January's column with every character you create. You don't need to answer all the questions all the time; you can focus on the secrets question (question 8) to build intrigue. The trick to building strong yet simple intrigue is to start small. One good secret will do. Then decide whether characters *want to share the secret*.

Let's say you have a merchant who runs the fantasy equivalent of a pawnshop—a staple of many D&D games. His secret is (perhaps predictably) that he is

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a member of and a fence for the local thieves' guild. You might be tempted to detail the entire thieves' guild, figure out the merchant's place within it, and create a host of conspiracies, plots, and scams in which the guild is involved. Slow down. First, unless you have a real and concrete way to have your merchant spill the beans about his affiliation, such work will go to waste; the adventurers are likely to shop for new magic items and components and then go on their merry way without any further interaction. Instead, dangle the secret in a way that attracts nosy adventurers. Revealing information passively as a plot device is . . . passive. Letting a player figure out that there's a secret afoot gives players a feeling of satisfaction and involvement in the world.

For instance, you could have the merchant try to make contact with a rogue in the party by using the local version of thieves' cant (typically a Thievery check opposed by Insight). A shady or slick merchant connected to organized crime is a genre trope. As long as this merchant has enough "screen time," any rogue (or even paladin) in the party will eventually become curious and try to determine the merchant's connection to the local guild.

Keeping secrets simple, and keeping them secret until the adventurers actively search for them, is key. Do not over-design (or do much designing at all) until the players take the initiative to have their characters seek out secrets. This allows them to engage in intrigue actively. As with the structure of a good dungeon adventure, choice and active exploration is the strategy for success here. Don't let intrigue happen to adventurers; let them engage in it.

An alternative to letting characters seek out the clues is to leave clues lying about where characters and players can't miss them. Only a player with no curiosity will turn away from an obvious clue, and curiosity tends to be in good supply around most D&D tables. The challenge with this approach is not in uncovering the secrets but in figuring out how they connect and what they mean.

Once engaged, don't let intrigue lie fallow. The merchant who realizes that an adventurer has uncovered his connections to the guild might be all smiles and cooperation while the well-armed bunch is in his shop, but things will be quite different once they're out of sight. He'll mobilize the gang to take care of the threat through violence or guile. Perhaps he will try to recruit the adventurer to his side of the law. Criminals can have a twisted sense that they are the good guys in a fight against oppression or that they are somehow serving the common good. Persuading heroes that the thieves' guild has good intentions can be as fun and challenging as sending a hit squad after them.

You can use the same principles in the hall of the Society of Eldritch Study, the Temple of Erathis, or the court of King Delgadol. Give nearly everyone a hook, and follow it up with a reaction when the hooks come into play.

Always be on guard against going too far. The boy who cleans the chamber pots and the dim-witted ambassador who was just exiled to a far-flung corner of the continent probably have few or no secrets that are worth tracking down. Intrigue doesn't need to be everywhere.

What's more, high-profile NPCs with no secrets can be as puzzling as those with many secrets. Players will always assume that "no secrets" actually means "really important, well-hidden secrets." A few dead ends can add to your world's illusion of reality.

Rules as Support, Not as Hindrance

In a world with a skill called Insight and magical forms of divination, keeping secrets can be difficult. The trick is that when you run a game with intrigue, you don't really want to keep the secrets. You want them to be found, but you also want the players to feel as if they got the information by being smart.

Assign levels to secrets. A secret's level determines the level of the DC for finding it. Use the easy, moderate, and hard designators to determine the specific DC for a skill check. For example, recall that merchant we discussed earlier. Assume that the adventurers are 3rd level, and you want his secret to be somewhat easy to figure out.

Level: The merchant's secret is level 3, the same as him. An easy skill check at level 3 has a DC of 9.

Thievery or Streetwise DC 9: *Success:* By speaking to him in the local thieves cant, the adventurers can learn that the merchant is a thieves' guild member. *Failure by 4 or more:* The character fumbles the attempt at communication. The merchant clams up, and he knows that the adventurer is fishing for information.

Thievery or Streetwise DC 13: *Success:* The same as DC 9, plus the adventurer notices that the merchant is wearing a platinum ring. It's said that the Guild Master of Thieves gave some of his top earners a platinum ring last midsummer. *Failure by 4 or more:* The merchant notices that the adventurer is taking a lot of interest in his ring and becomes suspicious.

Thievery or Streetwise DC 21: *Success:* The same as DC 9 and DC 13, and the adventurer recognizes one of the magic items on display as the sword of a well-known local adventurer who was found dead in a ravine a month ago. *Failure:* As DC 9 and DC 13.

High check results garner a lot of information, which you can adjust depending on whether the adventurer tried to engage the merchant with the local thieves' cant. It's a good idea to not make these checks passive; adventurers should actively engage in intrigues. It's also a good idea to not allow repeated attempts without escalating risk; otherwise, nothing will remain hidden for long.

What about those pesky divination rituals? Speak with Dead works quite well with this system. Use the secret DCs as the Diplomacy DCs of that ritual. Even the dead have secrets; possibly more than the living have. Likewise, use the DCs as benchmarks for what the mystic sages and oracles might know. Better yet, if these rituals see a lot of use of, give the spirit its own personality, agenda, and secrets. Some spirits lie in order to protect their own intrigues.

The Mailbag

It's mail time again! The following questions come not from the Save My Game group but from players who tracked me down at shows, sent me e-mails, and pinged me through Facebook. If you have a question, feel free to track me down by hook or by crook, but the best method is the Save My Game group.

Backsies. Really?

I'm running a paragon-level game right now, and the players have so many powers and little add-ons to power from feats and magic items, that they forget things they could have done during their turns and then ask for backsies. Often this is just damage bonuses when they forget a modifier, but sometimes they ask to go back and redo something big from their turn even after we have moved on to the next turn. Should I allow this?

–Rewinding DM

No! I know, a draconian stance can be hard to maintain. After all, we want to have fun playing D&D, and part of a players' fun is getting the most from his or her toys. You might allow one more backup, but warn players that from now on, a turn ends when a turn ends. If the player forgets something during his or her turn, the adventurer forgot it, too. Chalk it up to experience and move on. Battle is filled with confusion, hesitation, and mistakes. Describe this little house rule in those terms, and announce it at the start of a game session so that no one is blindsided by an apparent change of policy on your part. And for the sake of fairness, hold yourself to the same standard.

Passive Gone Crazy

My players have min/maxed some of their skills to such an extent that using the typical DC chart has little chance to challenge those skills. I find this annoying in the extreme, but I feel like raising the DCs higher negates the choices they've made with their characters. What can I do?

–Skill Mad

It's annoying, isn't it? Still, they put effort into gaining those high modifiers, and you need to let them reap the benefits most of the time. When you design adventures, keep those bonuses in mind. Assume that characters will succeed on most skill checks, but don't be afraid to ramp up the DCs every once in a while. Enemies and monsters, like characters, often have a chance to learn the strengths and weaknesses of those out to get them. Develop solid story reasons to challenge these uber-skillful characters and to give your players a run for their money.

You can use a few other tricks, too. First, if you're letting characters make multiple attempts to use the same skill in the same situation, stop. Various DM's books make it clear that in many cases, a character gets one chance to succeed with a skill; if the first check fails, the task is beyond him for the time being. Second, if you're letting everyone have a shot at the same task, someone is bound to succeed just by rolling high. Consider whether a task is a type that can be attempted just once, by one character, with a few other characters assisting.

Moving a boulder is a good example of both of these principles. No one should get more than one chance; either you can move it, or you can't. It is perfectly reasonable to insist that only the strongest character gets to make the check, with a few other characters using the aid another action to give a boost. How many characters can help depends on how many people can get their shoulders against the boulder. It's also reasonable for you to rule that if the fighter with Strength 20 can't move it, then the wizard with Strength 11 doesn't get to try. When someone asks why not, explain that the fighter didn't fail because he rolled poorly; rather, his poor roll indicated that the boulder is wedged in so tightly that it will take a Strength higher than 20 to move it. This makes the dice rolls an integral part of the unfolding story and not just a momentary sound effect while characters steamroll their way across the adventure.

About the Author

Stephen Radney-MacFarland caught the D&D bug at an impressionable age. Once the content manager for the RPGA and a developer for the 4th Edition Dungeons & Dragons rules, he is now a freelance game designer doing work for Wizards of the Coast and Paizo Publishing, and he is part of a fledgling group of game commentators and game designers called NeoGrognard. During daylight hours, Stephen teaches game production classes at the International Academy of Design and Technology of Seattle.

Dark Sun Threats

By Bruce R. Cordell

Illustrations by Michael Phillippi, Mark Tedin, and Ben Wootten

The crimson sun of Athas scorches the life from anything that crawls or flies, and storms of sand scour the foliage from the barren ground. Athas is a land of blood and dust, whose residents must be crueler, faster, and hungrier than their fellows to survive the hour, let alone the day or the year. From the sorcerer-kings to the meanest desert rat, each creature discovers that survival in the cities and wastelands of Athas requires one to accept a lifetime of bleak savagery.

The *Dark Sun® Creature Catalog™* introduces new monsters and monster themes suitable for the harsh orb of Athas, where every day is a struggle. This article details a few additional varieties of monsters, adds two new themes (defiler and templar), and presents an example monster for each of those new themes.

Aarakocra Darter

Aarakocra darters glide through the dead air over Athasian badlands and scrub plains, their eyes sharp for the movement of prey. When aarakocras cannot overpower travelers in the wastes, they resort to theft and extortion. A tribe of these desert scavengers includes divers, warriors, windcallers, and sometimes darters.

Swooping over the battle, the darter watches for an opening as other aarakocras close in to attack with spears and beaks. The darter has spent long hours brewing dart toxins from briar sap and braiding strong barbed nets from scrub vines and roots, and it yearns to put those weapons to good use.

Aarakocra Darters in Combat

An aarakocra darter stays aloft, dropping its barbed net to ensnare foes and then flinging poisoned darts from the sky. It can defend itself up close if need be, but the darter tries to avoid the thick of battle, staying mobile above the fray or landing on a high ledge nearby to throw darts at trapped enemies.

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Aarakocra Darter	**Level 7 Controller**
Medium natural humanoid	XP 300
HP 80; **Bloodied** 40	**Initiative** +7
AC 21, **Fortitude** 18, **Reflex** 20, **Will** 19	**Perception** +11
Speed 5, fly 6	Low-light vision

Standard Actions

Claw ✦ At-Will

Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +12 vs. AC

Hit: 2d6 + 4 damage, and the darter shifts 1 square.

Dart (poison, weapon) **✦ At-Will**

Attack: Ranged 10 (one creature); +10 vs. Reflex

Hit: 1d6 + 6 damage, and ongoing 5 poison damage (save ends).

First Failed Saving Throw: The target takes ongoing 5 poison damage and is slowed (save ends both).

Second Failed Saving Throw: The target instead falls unconscious (save ends).

Hurl Barbed Net (weapon) **✦ At-Will**

Attack: Area burst 1 within 5 (creatures in the burst); +10 vs. Reflex

Hit: 2d6 + 4 damage, and the target is immobilized (save ends).

First Failed Saving Throw: The target is restrained instead of immobilized (save ends).

Move Actions

Sly Takeoff ✦ Recharge when first bloodied

Effect: The darter shifts 1 square and then flies up to 5 squares.

Skills Stealth +12

Str 14 (+5)	**Dex** 19 (+7)	**Wis** 16 (+6)
Con 16 (+6)	**Int** 8 (+2)	**Cha** 8 (+2)

Alignment unaligned **Languages** Common

Equipment 20 darts, 5 nets

Gith Dust Racer

Giths are savage tribal humanoids who retain a flicker of the psionic mastery of their forerunners. A tribe of giths includes hobblers, spearheads, drones, and, often as not, dust racers. Quicker than other members of the tribe, dust racers skim ahead of gith hunting packs, flushing out quarry. Once they've located suitable prey, they hide and wait for the pack or return to deliver tidings of what they discovered. Bold dust racers sometimes use their maneuverability to provoke their prey, drawing it back to their companions.

Gith Dust Racers in Combat

Gith dust racers use their high speed, shifting attacks, and rechargeable *telekinetic leap* to move quickly about the battlefield.

Gith Dust Racer	**Level 7 Skirmisher**
Medium natural humanoid	XP 300
HP 80; **Bloodied** 40	**Initiative** +9
AC 21, **Fortitude** 18, **Reflex** 19, **Will** 19	**Perception** +9
Speed 8	

Traits

Mind Tar ✦ Aura 1

Squares in the aura are difficult terrain for enemies.

Standard Actions

Bone Sword (weapon) **✦ At-Will**

Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +12 vs. AC

Hit: 2d6 + 4 damage, and the gith can shift 1 square.

Javelin (weapon) **✦ At-Will**

Effect: Before the attack, the gith can shift 1 square.

Attack: Ranged 20 (one creature); +12 vs. AC

Hit: 2d8 + 1 damage.

Move Actions

Telekinetic Leap ✦ Recharge ⚅ ⚄ ⚃

Effect: The gith flies up to 5 squares.

Triggered Actions

Psionic Augmentation (psychic) **✦ Recharge** when the gith takes psychic damage

Trigger: The gith hits with *bone sword*.

Effect (Free Action): The triggering attack deals 2d6 extra psychic damage.

Skills Nature +9, Stealth +12

Str 12 (+4)	**Dex** 18 (+7)	**Wis** 12 (+4)
Con 16 (+6)	**Int** 10 (+3)	**Cha** 18 (+7)

Alignment evil **Languages** Common

Equipment inix shell armor, bone sword, 10 obsidian-tipped javelins

Human Fire Elementalist

Humans live everywhere on Athas, and likewise, their alliances and concerns are all over the map. Some humans toil under the dictates of oppressors, and others are oppressors. Some humans' hearts burn so hot with fury or ambition that those people can draw upon the fire that smolders beneath the skin of Athas. Fire elementalists frequently serve the primal forces inherent in the magma-permeated depths, but some spellcasters call upon the spirits rampant in the sun-scorched air. Their great personal power can lead them to become community leaders, but more often they are shunned as volatile devastators.

Human Fire Elementalists in Combat

A human fire elementalist always carries a scorched and blackened staff. Many elementalists like to create a zone of fire with *ring of fire*, then slide enemies into that zone using *volcanic eruption*.

Human Fire Elementalist Medium natural humanoid	**Level 8 Artillery** XP 350
HP 67; **Bloodied** 33	**Initiative** +4
AC 20, **Fortitude** 17, **Reflex** 20, **Will** 21	**Perception** +7
Speed 6	
Traits	
☼ **Crown of Flame** ✦ **Aura** 2	
Enemies have vulnerable 5 fire while in the aura.	
Standard Actions	
⊕ **Magma Staff** (fire, weapon) ✦ **At-Will**	
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +13 vs. AC	
Hit: 2d6 + 5 fire damage.	
⊛ **Rivulet of Fire** (fire, implement) ✦ **At-Will**	
Attack: Ranged 10 (one or two creatures); +13 vs. Reflex	
Hit: Ongoing 10 fire damage (save ends).	
✲ **Ring of Fire** (fire, implement, zone) ✦ **Encounter**	
Effect: Area burst 2 within 10; the burst creates a zone that lasts until the end of the elementalist's next turn. The zone blocks line of sight and is difficult terrain. Any creature that enters the zone or ends its turn there takes 10 fire damage.	
Sustain Minor: The zone persists until the end of the elementalist's next turn.	
✲ **Volcanic Eruption** (fire, implement) ✦ **Encounter**	
Attack: Area burst 1 within 10 (one creature); +13 vs. Reflex	
Hit: 2d6 + 10 fire damage, and the elementalist slides the target up to 3 squares. If the target has ongoing fire damage, it is also dazed (save ends).	
Skills Arcana +13, Nature +12	
Str 10 (+4) **Dex** 11 (+4)	**Wis** 17 (+7)
Con 13 (+5) **Int** 19 (+8)	**Cha** 10 (+4)
Alignment unaligned **Languages** Common, Primordial	
Equipment staff	

Thri-Kreen Hunter

Thri-kreen are fierce desert creatures that deflect the sun's relentless gaze with a natural carapace. Bonded to their fellows, thri-kreen put their own needs behind the needs of the pack. A thri-kreen pack's survival depends on its hunters. These deadly throwers prowl the wastes alongside thri-kreen maulers and warriors.

Thri-Kreen Hunters in Combat

A thri-kreen hunter stalks its prey, crouching in silence as it waits for the pack's warriors to engage the enemy in melee combat. A hunter is precise and collected, and it seeks a quick, painless kill. In a blur of movement, a hunter jumps to avoid melee attackers, somersaulting to a graceful landing across the field. It instantly flings multiple chatkchas into enemy ranks, deftly catching the throwing wedges as they return.

Thri-Kreen Hunter	**Level 7 Artillery**
Medium natural humanoid	XP 300
HP 61; **Bloodied** 30	**Initiative** +7
AC 22, **Fortitude** 18, **Reflex** 20, **Will** 19	**Perception** +11
Speed 7	Low-light vision
Standard Actions	
Claw ✦ At-Will	
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +12 vs. AC	
Hit: 1d6 + 4 damage.	
Chatkcha (weapon) **✦ At-Will**	
Attack: Ranged 6/12 (one creature); +14 vs. AC	
Hit: 1d6 + 4 damage.	
Double Throw ✦ At-Will	
Effect: The hunter uses *chatkcha* twice.	
Slashing Wind ✦ Recharge ⚄ ⚅	
Effect: The hunter uses *chatkcha* three times.	
Springing Throw ✦ Recharge when first bloodied	
Effect: The hunter shifts up to 4 squares and uses *chatkcha* at any point during this movement.	
Move Actions	
Mantis Jump ✦ Encounter	
Effect: The hunter jumps up to 7 squares. This movement does not provoke opportunity attacks.	
Str 15 (+5) **Dex** 19 (+7) **Wis** 16 (+6)	
Con 13 (+4) **Int** 10 (+3) **Cha** 10 (+3)	
Alignment unaligned **Languages** Common, Thri-Kreen	
Equipment leather armor, 4 chatkchas	

MONSTER THEMES

The *Dark Sun Creature Catalog* presents monster themes especially for the desert-bred creatures of Athas (monster themes were introduced in *Dungeon Master's Guide*® 2). Monster themes are collections of related powers that you can add to nearly any monster to give a group of otherwise unrelated creatures a shared look and feel.

This article offers two additional themes for monsters that are especially appropriate for Athas: defiler monsters and templar monsters. Each monster theme opens with a brief explanation of why and when it should be used, then presents a suite of options for customizing a monster.

Defiler Monster

To use arcane magic on Athas, whether the practitioner is humanoid or monstrous, involves drawing on the vitality of plants, animals, and minor primal spirits. However, each time a creature uses arcane magic, it has the choice to draw particularly deeply on the surrounding life force. Those that do so are defilers. Monsters that can cast or otherwise channel arcane magic are defilers by nature, and they create swaths of destruction wherever they go. Some monsters know how to defile by instinct; others learn.

Skill Modifications: +2 bonus to Arcana checks and Bluff checks.

Defiler Monster Attack Powers

Creatures that have the capacity to defile do so at every opportunity. A defiler monster can drain nearby life to accomplish a variety of effects if the creature is powerful and motivated enough.

Defiling Attack

A defiler monster draws upon the vitality of nearby life to fuel its power, unconcerned about—or even enjoying—the harm it causes.

Triggered Actions

Defiling Attack (necrotic) **✦ At-Will**

Trigger: This creature makes an attack roll for an encounter or a daily power that lacks the charm keyword and that has a damage type other than psychic or radiant.

Effect (Free Action): This creature makes two attack rolls and uses either result. In addition, the target and one of this creature's allies within 20 squares of this creature take necrotic damage equal to the attacking creature's level. This damage ignores immunities and cannot be reduced in any way.

Draining Link

Though allies of defiling creatures bear the brunt of their companion's life-draining ways, sometimes enemies can also become fuel for the attack.

Triggered Actions

Draining Link (necrotic) **✦ Encounter**

Trigger: This creature uses *defiling attack*.

Effect (Free Action): One enemy of this creature within 20 squares of it takes ongoing 5 necrotic damage (save ends). In addition, this creature gains 5 temporary hit points.

Level 11: Ongoing 10 necrotic damage and 10 temporary hit points.

Level 21: Ongoing 15 necrotic damage and 15 temporary hit points.

Life Irruption

Sometimes the mere presence of a defiler monster twists at the spiritual fabric of the world, making victims more vulnerable to energy that corrodes their life force.

Triggered Actions

Life Irruption ✦ Encounter

Trigger: This creature uses *defiling attack*.

Effect (Free Action): The target gains vulnerable 5 necrotic (save ends).

Level 11: Vulnerable 10 necrotic.

Level 21: Vulnerable 15 necrotic.

Soul Tug

This creature can invest all its attacks with an element of defiling, so that foes feel the hollow draining power of their life being drawn out.

Free Actions

Soul Tug ✦ At-Will

Effect: All damage dealt by this creature's attacks during this turn is necrotic damage, rather than another damage type.

Defiler Monster Utility Powers

Using defiling magic degrades a creature's body, mind, and spirit. Such alterations show themselves in both obvious and subtle ways.

Borrowed Chance

Being allied with a defiler monster is not viable in the long term. Draining life becomes easier, and no one is safe.

Triggered Actions

Borrowed Chance (necrotic) ✦ **Encounter**

Trigger: This creature is subjected to an effect that a save can end.

Effect (Immediate Reaction): An ally within 10 squares of this creature takes necrotic damage equal to 5 + this creature's level, and this creature makes a saving throw against the triggering effect.

Necrotic Resistance

A defiling creature could build up some residual necrotic resistance; however, as noted in *defiling attack*, such resistance is trumped when an ally uses defiling magic to enhance its own attacks.

Traits

Necrotic Resistance

This creature gains resist 10 necrotic.

Level 11: Resist 15 necrotic.

Level 21: Resist 20 necrotic.

Reanimator

The ultimate augmentation a defiling creature seeks is the extension of its own life, at the expense of others who are unfortunate enough to be too close.

Triggered Actions

Reanimator (necrotic) ✦ **Encounter**

Trigger: This creature drops to 0 hit points.

Effect (Immediate Interrupt): The nearest creature within 20 squares of this creature takes 15 necrotic damage and is dazed (save ends). In addition, this creature instead drops to 1 hit point.

Soul Chasm

Once a creature has so twisted itself that it regularly drains life from others to bolster itself, its body begins to automatically draw upon the life energy of other creatures that get too close if it is wounded.

Traits

☼ **Soul Chasm** (necrotic) ✦ **Aura 1**

While this creature is bloodied, any creature that ends its turn in the aura takes 5 necrotic damage.

Level 11: 10 necrotic damage.

Level 21: 15 necrotic damage.

Templar Monster

Templars are agents of sorcerer-kings that serve as judges, officials, and enforcers of the sorcerer-kings' laws. They wield authority and the magic of their liege lords to maintain order in the great cities of Athas. They have wide discretion in how they go about their duties with little oversight; many have become brutal and corrupt.

Traditionally, most templars are humanoid. However, sorcerer-kings sometimes impress other creatures into service in specific roles. Templar monsters often appear in support of the efforts of humanoid templars, but sometimes templar monsters individually have full authority to enforce the civic powers handed down by their sorcerer-king. Templar monsters protect the sorcerer-king's safety or serve as agents implementing a secret mission ordered by the sorcerer-king. Templar monsters can enter foreign lands to operate as spies, assassins, and diplomats.

Skill Modifications: +2 bonus to Arcana checks and Diplomacy checks.

Templar Monster Attack Powers

Templar monsters can summon the magic of the sorcerer-kings they serve. Many templars use their positions to ruthlessly oppress the common people, and the powers they employ reflect this fact. Worse, monster templars have their sorcerer-king's sanction to use defiling magic at will.

Defiling Power

Templar monsters are invested with arcane power by their masters, and many of them further boost these powers by drawing on nearby life. Thus a templar monster could choose from the attack powers described in the "Defiler Monster" entry as well as those described here.

Reprimand of the Sorcerer-King

As a loyal subject of a sorcerer-king mystically linked to its liege's power, a templar monster that is wounded in the pursuit of its duties comes to the sorcerer-king's attention. When the templar monster is first bloodied, a flash of punishing anger strikes out.

Triggered Actions

Reprimand of the Sorcerer-King (psychic) ✦ **Encounter**

Trigger: This creature is first bloodied.

Attack (No Action): Close burst 2 (creatures in the burst); level + 3 vs. Will

Hit: Psychic damage equal to this creature's level + 3.

Sorcerer-King's Regard

The templar monster has learned the trick of channeling its sorcerer-king's gaze in a way that focuses and magnifies it like the blistering face of the sun. This effect saps a foe's ability to flee while renewing the vigor of allies.

Standard Actions

Sorcerer-King's Regard (radiant) ✦ **Encounter**

Attack: Area burst 1 within 10 (enemies in the burst); level + 3 vs. Reflex

Hit: Radiant damage equal to this creature's level + 3, and the target is immobilized (save ends).

Effect: Each ally of this creature that makes an attack before the end of this creature's next turn gains temporary hit points equal to this creature's level.

Templar's Claw

A templar monster acts in the name of its sorcerer-king, and that means putting the fear of death into its foes while filling its allies with brutal zeal.

Triggered Actions

Templar's Claw (psychic) ✦ **Encounter**

Trigger: This creature makes a basic attack.

Effect (Free Action): One enemy within 5 squares of this creature takes 5 psychic damage and is slowed until the end of this creature's next turn. The next ally of this creature that makes an attack roll against the enemy before the end of the encounter gains a +4 bonus to the roll.

Level 11: 10 psychic damage.

Level 21: 15 psychic damage.

Templar's Command

Calling upon the vortex of arcane power resident in its master, a templar monster can instill magical terror in its sorcerer-king's foes. Allies of the templar monster take heart at the display of power channeled from the sorcerer-king.

Standard Actions

Templar's Command (fear, psychic) ✦ **Encounter**

Attack: Area burst 2 within 10 (enemies in the burst); level + 3 vs. Reflex

Hit: Psychic damage equal to this creature's basic attack damage (use the highest if this creature has more than one basic attack), and the target is slowed until the end of this creature's next turn.

Effect: The next ally of this creature that makes an attack roll against one of the targets of this attack before the end of this creature's next turn gains a +2 bonus to the roll.

Templar Monster Utility Powers

A sorcerer-king provides for its templars in a variety of ways, granting them special abilities to deal with a wide range of situations. Templar monsters can be called upon to punish those who break the sorcerer-king's laws, and to reward those who do the sorcerer-king's bidding.

Mantle of the Sorcerer-King

An invisible aura of power protects the templar monster from enemies that dare to disregard its authority in the name of the sorcerer-king.

Triggered Actions
Mantle of the Sorcerer-King ✦ Encounter
Trigger: An enemy is adjacent to this creature at the start of this creature's turn.
Effect (Free Action): The triggering enemy grants combat advantage until the end of this creature's turn. If this creature attacks and damages the triggering enemy this turn, one ally within 5 squares of this creature can make a basic attack as a free action against the triggering enemy.

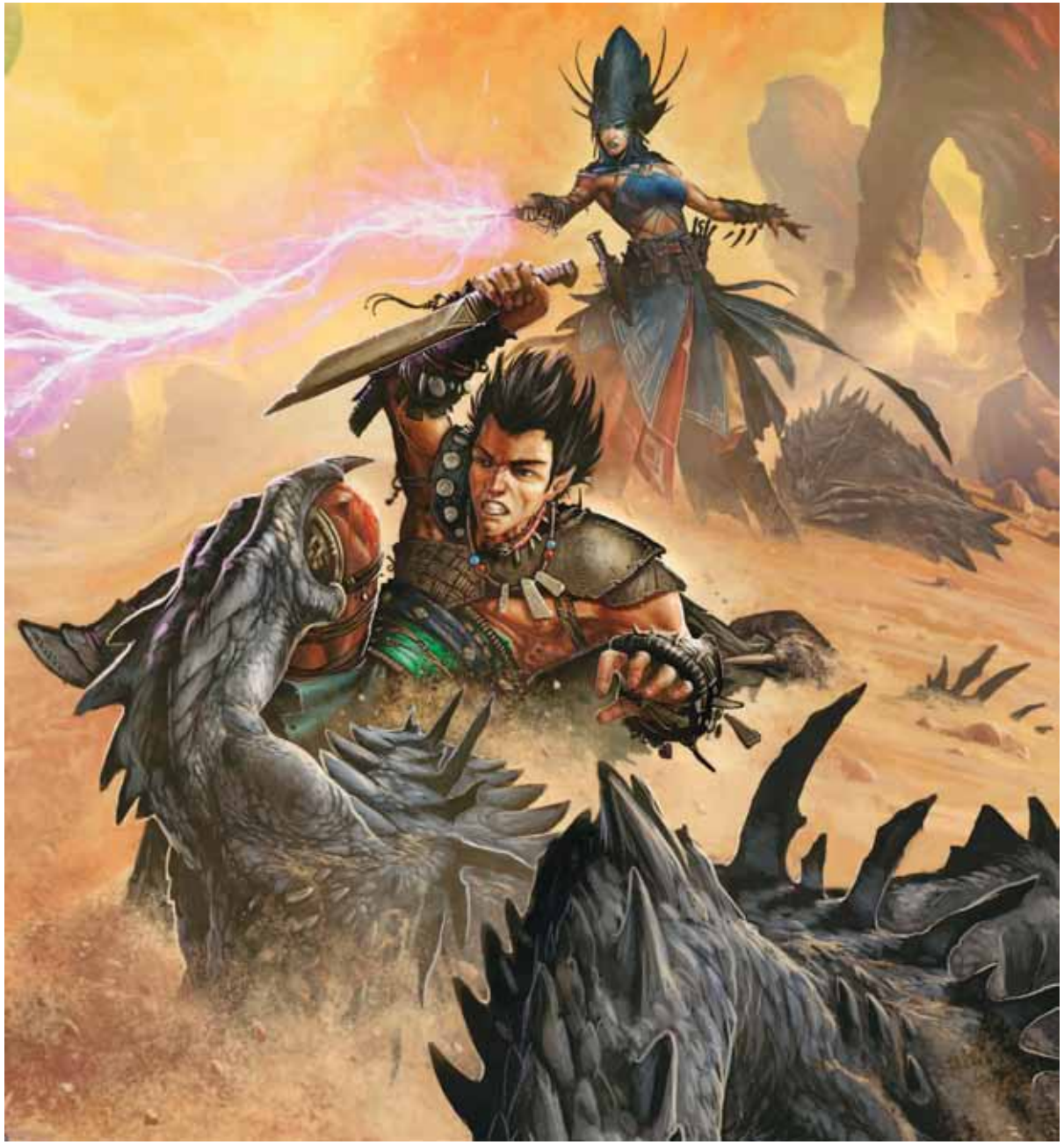
Sorcerer-King's Reward

A templar monster can provide incentives to its allies to throw themselves into the fray by granting the benefit of brutality.

Triggered Actions
Sorcerer-King's Reward ✦ Encounter
Trigger: This creature makes a basic attack.
Effect (Free Action): Before the end of this creature's next turn, the next ally within 5 squares of this creature that ends its turn adjacent to the target of the triggering attack gains a +1 bonus to attack rolls and a +3 bonus to damage rolls. These bonuses last until the end of that ally's next turn.
Level 11: +6 bonus to damage rolls.
Level 21: +9 bonus to damage rolls.

About the Author

Bruce R. Cordell is an Origins and ENnie award-winning game designer whose long list of professional credits includes the Gamma World™ game, *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*, *Forgotten Realms® Campaign Guide*, *Prince of Undeath*™, and *Open Grave: Secrets of the Undead*™. Bruce is also an author of Forgotten Realms novels, including the Abolethic Sovereignty series and the Sword of the Gods series. Find him online at brucecordell.com.



Eye on Dark Sun

The Heartwood Spear

By Rodney Thompson ✦ Illustration by Zoltan Boros and Gabor Szikszai

In the wake of the death of the tyrant sorcerer-king Kalak, many people throughout Athas believe that their vicious rulers are far more vulnerable than appearance would indicate. In a sense, this is true, since much of the sorcerer-kings' power derives from their control over their people, as wielded through their templars. Anyone, however, who has faced one of the sorcerer-kings and lived to tell the tale can describe the overpowering strength of will and the raw arcane and psionic power that radiates from a sorcerer-king. It is clear now that sorcerer-kings can be overthrown, but any attempt to do so must be accompanied by great luck, a willingness to sacrifice one's life to end a tyrant's reign, and the right tools and talent to overcome the mighty defiling magic and the power of the Way that keep a tyrant on the throne.

Few people other than King Tithian and the heroes of Tyr grasp how much more was involved in Kalak's death than springing a surprise attack upon him. The gladiator Rikus wielded a powerful primal artifact known as the *Heartwood Spear*, and a wound from this spear is what made the sorcerer-king vulnerable to further attack. Without the *Heartwood Spear*, Kalak's defenses would have turned aside the gladiator's attack, and the sorcerer-king would still be ruling over Tyr and terrorizing the other city-states after completing his transformation into a dragon.

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WHAT'S A DEFILER?

Many of the *Heartwood Spear's* properties and powers apply or have additional effects only when the spear is used against "a defiler." Anyone who wields arcane magic has the potential to be a defiler, so when does the spear gain these effects?

That's a question for the DM to answer. The question should be considered from the perspective of the primal spirits that watch over the spear. It's possible for primal spirits to be tricked, but it is unlikely.

In most cases, the DM and the players will have a clear idea of whether a particular antagonist qualifies as a defiler. A character who uses defiling magic without remorse clearly fits the description. Someone who uses defiling magic only in extreme circumstances, and then tries to repair the damage afterward, is probably not a defiler.

The *Heartwood Spear* was given to the heroes of Tyr by the halflings of the Forest Ridge, beyond the Ringing Mountains. The weapon channels the primal forces of the world; in many ways, it is the physical manifestation of Athas's remaining will to fight against defiling magic. Though the origin of the spear is shrouded in mystery, some believe that a halfling shaman crafted the artifact while under the guidance of primal spirits, and they theorize that the shaman crafted it from a fragment of a tree of life.

Upon Kalak's death, the other sorcerer-kings realized that a weapon capable of slaying them exists, and that it can be used by creatures weaker than the sorcerer-kings. The weapon disappeared during the chaotic aftermath of the liberation of Tyr. Though many seek it (both to keep it out of the hands of rebels and to use it against a sorcerer-king), its location remains a mystery.

Heartwood Spear **Paragon Level**

This wood-shafted spear has wicked, pointed heads at both ends.

Weapon: Spear
Enhancement: +4 to attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +4d12 damage
Property: The spear cannot be broken and is immune to damage.
Property: You can throw the spear as a heavy thrown weapon (range 10/20).
Property: When you hit and deal damage to a defiler with the spear, any damage dice that show a 1 or a 2 deal 3 damage instead.
Property: When you attack a defiler with the spear and miss, the defiler still takes half damage if the attack doesn't normally deal damage on a miss.
Power (Daily): Free Action. *Trigger:* You hit an enemy with a weapon attack using this spear. *Effect:* The enemy is weakened (save ends). *Aftereffect:* The enemy is weakened until the end of your next turn.

Goals of the Heartwood Spear

Unlike some other artifacts, the *Heartwood Spear* has no true sentience or greater will behind it. Instead, the primal spirits of the world decide the fate of the spear and its wielder. Many primal guardians believe that the few remaining primal spirits of the world take an active role in guiding the wielder of the spear and use the wielder as a tool to reduce the threat of further defiling. Any goals and concordance seemingly expressed or displayed by the spear originate from the primal spirits that have a vested interest in the use of the artifact—they do not originate from the spear.

- Destroy all defilers, especially the sorcerer-kings.
- Help restore the life force of Athas.
- Protect the few remaining verdant reaches of Athas against destruction.
- Restore the influence of the primal spirits over the peoples of Athas.

Roleplaying the Heartwood Spear

Though the *Heartwood Spear* has no ability to interact with a character who wields it, the primal spirits that watch over the spear might manifest themselves to the wielder. For example, while heroes are camped at an oasis, the wielder of the *Heartwood Spear* might see a vision of a spectral floating mantle beckoning him or her away from the camp. Once away from other ears, the creature speaks in a human voice, conveying the desires of the primal spirits.

Other forms of interaction could include subtle cues from nature (for example, a strong gust of wind pushing the wielder down one path when confronted

with a fork in the road) or actual intervention in times of crisis (such as a primal spirit possessing the body of the wielder to give the hero more strength in battle).

The concordance of the *Heartwood Spear* represents the wielder's esteem in the minds of the primal spirits that oversee the artifact's use. As the wielder gains the favor of those primal spirits by bringing the spear closer to fulfilling its intended purpose, those spirits unlock more of the spear's abilities. If the wielder acts in a way that earns the spirits' disdain, the wielder might find that the spirits have placed an effect on the artifact to make the wielder want to cast it aside.

CONCORDANCE

Starting Score	5
Owner gains a level	+1d10
Owner has at least one primal power	+2
Owner has the primal guardian theme	+2
Owner uses the spear to kill a defiler (maximum 1/encounter)	+1
Owner spends at least 8 hours tending to an area of verdant growth	+1
Owner or a nearby ally uses arcane defiling	-2
Owner shows blatant disregard for preserving natural growth	-2

Pleased (16–20)

"With this spear, I shall free the city-states from the tyranny of the Dragon."

The primal spirits are pleased with the wielder of the *Heartwood Spear*. They bless the wielder with the ability to lash out at defilers who are far more powerful than the wielder, to encourage heroes to step forward and attempt what they would otherwise consider impossible.

Property: You gain resist 15 necrotic.

Property: You roll two dice for attack rolls against defilers and the Dragon of Tyr, using either result. If an effect lets you reroll an attack roll and you rolled twice because of this property, you reroll both dice. If an effect causes you to roll twice for an attack roll and use either the higher or the lower result, this property cannot be used with that attack.

Power (Daily): Free Action. *Trigger:* You hit a defiler that is higher in level than you with a weapon attack using this spear. *Effect:* Until the end of the encounter, that defiler takes a -4 penalty to attack rolls and all defenses.

Satisfied (12–15)

"Truly I wield the bane of the sorcerer-kings. Its power is now the power of the enslaved."

The primal spirits are satisfied with the wielder of the *Heartwood Spear*, but they could be better placated. Primal spirits might still communicate their desires to him or her, but they do so rarely. Great defilers such as the Dragon and the sorcerer-kings still roam the world, and Athas's primal spirits will not be satisfied until these enemies are destroyed. To aid in this process, the weapon begins to exude a sap that is anathema to the vile creatures of Athas.

Property: You gain resist 10 necrotic.

Power (Daily ✦ Poison, Radiant): Free Action. *Trigger:* You hit an enemy with a weapon attack using this spear. *Effect:* The enemy takes ongoing 15 poison and radiant damage (save ends).

Normal (5–11)

"So, this is the spear that slew Kalak? Such a small thing to bring down an ancient tyrant."

The primal spirits wait to see whether the wielder of the *Heartwood Spear* takes actions that please them.

The spear has great power, but the wielder has not yet unlocked its potential.

Unsatisfied (1–4)

"A force of the natural world sets itself against me as long as I carry the spear."

The primal spirits don't believe that the wielder of the *Heartwood Spear* has goals that align with theirs. For now, the artifact gives warning by lashing out at its wielder from time to time and letting its venomous sap sting in the wound.

Property: You gain vulnerable 5 poison and lose any poison resistance you have.

Property: When you roll a natural 1 on any weapon attack using this spear, you take ongoing 5 damage (save ends).

Angered (0 or lower)

"The spear is not mine to own; I fear that someone—or something—is coming for it even as we speak."

The primal spirits no longer want the wielder of the *Heartwood Spear* to have the artifact, and they begin communicating this fact to those who serve them. It won't be long before the spear's chosen guardians come to claim it.

Property: You gain vulnerable 10 poison and lose any poison resistance you have.

Property: When you roll a natural 1 on any weapon attack using this spear, you take ongoing 5 damage (save ends).

Property: You grant combat advantage while holding or carrying the spear.

WHERE IS THE HEARTWOOD SPEAR NOW?

In the Prism Pentad novels, the *Heartwood Spear* was transformed into a massive tree in the Canyon of Guthay when Nok, the halfling keeper of the artifact, tried to prevent the weapon from falling into the hands of the wizard Sadira. Of course, that's only one way that events could turn out. Instead, in the confusion following the attack on Kalak in Tyr's arena, the *Heartwood Spear* might have been spirited away by members of the Veiled Alliance, or by templars, or by a bystander who thought he was grabbing a souvenir and didn't realize what he had. The artifact might have changed hands many times since then, and it could be in a completely different part of the Tablelands by now.

If events in your campaign did play out as depicted in the novels, then somewhere in the Canyon of Guthay stands a large oak tree that is waiting to be transformed once more into the *Heartwood Spear*. Obtaining the artifact from the tree might be the subject of an entire adventure, as many competing groups try to track the tree's location and race to retrieve the spear, either to use it against a sorcerer-king or to hide it in a place where it can never be a threat again.

Moving On

"All things must fade in time; for this spear, it is time once more to become a part of the land."

The *Heartwood Spear* is guarded jealously by the primal spirits and their servants. It is unlikely to remain in the hands of one wielder for long. Once the weapon has been used for the purpose its primal spirit guardians have set before the wielder, or once the wielder veers too far away from their plans, the spirits that oversee the *Heartwood Spear* either manifest and reclaim it or order one of their servants to do so. Like the natural world, the *Heartwood Spear* obeys a cycle of life and death, ascending in importance in the world before fading back into obscurity for a time. When the primal spirits deem it necessary, the spear will rise to prominence again just as spring renews that which dies in winter.

Not every wielder of the *Heartwood Spear* is willing to give it up once he or she is meant to be done with it. When this happens, the primal spirits set their power against that of the wielder. In most cases, the primal spirits command their servants to seize the artifact and punish its wielder. A character who refuses to give up the weapon might find a horde of halflings closing in, eager to take back the spear at any cost. In rare cases, the spirits themselves might intervene and confront the spear's user directly.

When the *Heartwood Spear* is surrendered to the primal spirits or their designated guardian, the artifact is carried to a secret location and transformed once more into a vibrant and ancient oak tree.

About the Author

Rodney Thompson is an RPG designer at Wizards of the Coast, originally from Chattanooga, Tennessee. His credits for the Dungeons & Dragons® game include *Monster Manual® 3*, the *Dark Sun® Campaign Setting*, *Heroes of the Fallen Lands*, *Heroes of the Forgotten Kingdoms*, and *Monster Vault*.

Beneath the Dust

By Jared Espley

An adventure for characters of 7th-9th level

Illustration by Craig J. Spearing ✦ Cartography by Mike Schley

The ancients taught us that life always moves in cycles—that from death, life inevitably springs up again. They were wrong. The defilers taught us that the cycle of life can be broken, that destruction can be made final. This is why the ancient trees of life were sacred. They represented a deeper font of life, one that could not be permanently erased with ease. If one could find such a thing today, it would be a treasure beyond reckoning.

—Gerlaq Sharptooth, druid of the High Ridge

Synopsis

This adventure deals with the discovery of a living relic from an age long past: a seed from a dying, primordial tree of life. A tree of life is a supernatural organism capable of bringing vitality to a devastated area, which makes it a treasure beyond price for preservers and others who would restore the verdure of Athas. They are highly sought after by defilers as well, and in particular by the sorcerer-kings, for they allow defiling magic to be cast without destroying the surrounding vegetation. A modern tree of life, as detailed in the *Dark Sun® Creature Catalog™*, is a source of vitality in a limited area. Primordial trees such as the one featured in this adventure are, in principle, able to rejuvenate entire regions.

In the course of the adventure, characters will face enraged tembos, undead guardians, thri-kreen raiders, and a ghostly protector before receiving a seed from the tree. Subsequent to this triumph, they are accosted by templars who were sent by a sorcerer-king to claim the seed.

This adventure takes place in the Dark Sun campaign world. It is intended for adventurers of 7th to 9th level. You can adjust the difficulty of the adventure by changing the numbers of monsters, their hit points, and their levels. Although much of the adventure background is specific to the world of Athas, the adventure can be transferred to a desert area in your own campaign world.

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There in the dark, something remarkable occurred. In the lightless, stale, barren cave, nurtured by the primal spirits and its own tenacious power to survive, the seed of life slowly took root. Forging its own nutrients from the stone, drawing sustenance from traces of water, it grew into a mighty tree. More life spread from it; moss grew on the walls, vines snaked through rusted weapons and armor, and the air became fresh.

Background

In a nearly forgotten age of genocidal warfare, the murderous sorcerer-king Nibenay pursued a fugitive band of elves and gnomes. The fugitives carried with them a seed from a tree of life. They hoped to plant the seed in a place where it might flourish in safety, far from the sorcerer-kings' destruction. They sought refuge in a small cave system, but Nibenay's soldiers tracked them there and besieged the cave.

Avor Firesworn, leader of the band, made a fateful decision as Nibenay's defilers closed in. Drawing on his knowledge of the supposed demigods who ruled parts of Athas at that time, he entered into a covenant with a force that he only dimly understood but perceived as a demigod of death. He and a few of his band swore a binding oath in which they offered their souls in exchange for the chance to protect the seed even after their deaths.

Soon thereafter, Nibenay's forces stormed the caves and Avor fell, his flesh consumed by defiling magic. The seed, however, lay hidden beneath his remains, and the sorcerer-king's soldiers did not find it. It was protected by the bargain Avor had struck with the entity from the Gray. Meanwhile, the primal spirits of that place also understood the value of the seed. They, too, were eager to keep it out of any defiler's hands, but their limited power to intervene was curtailed further by Avor's bargain.

Victorious in battle but frustrated by their failure to find the tree of life's seed, Nibenay's soldiers concluded that the seed had been no more than a rumor, or perhaps that Avor's flight had been a ruse to draw them away from the real seed's location. They sealed the cave when they withdrew, to conceal their deeds. Some time later, the spirits of Avor and his followers rose from the dead in fulfillment of their bargain. Still entombed in their cave, they began a lifeless vigil over the seed of life.

Ages passed. The land decayed into a desolate waste. Eventually, the sorcerer-kings ceased their genocidal campaigns and consolidated power in their city-states. Beneath the sand, Avor kept unceasing watch. There in the dark, something remarkable occurred; some might call it a miracle. In the lightless, stale, barren cave, nurtured by the primal spirits and its own tenacious power to survive, the seed of life slowly took root among Avor's bones. Forging its own nutrients from the stone below, drawing sustenance from traces of water in the air, it grew into a mighty tree. More life spread from it: moss grew on the walls of the cave, vines snaked through rusted weapons and armor, and the air became fresh.

Even trees of life are not immortal, however, and after many an age, the tree's life ebbed. Sensing that the tree's death was approaching, the primal spirits guided its roots outward in an effort to force open the buried tomb. The seal placed on the cave's entrance so long ago by Nibenay's soldiers cracked under the ponderous strain, and for the first time in ages, the world had sign of the tree. But the effort exhausted the tree of life. Enough energy remained to produce a single seed. The primal spirits rejoiced, called up windstorms to clear centuries' worth of drifted sand from the cave mouth, and began searching the region for people who could be trusted to carry the newborn seed of life to a place where it could flourish.

Those attuned to such things soon noticed the primal spirits' excitement. And all the while, Avor and his allies continued their watch.

Involving the Heroes

Characters can become involved in this adventure in at least three ways: by being part of an organization that seeks the tree, by being drawn to the scene by primal spirits, or by simply happening upon the cave in the course of their travels through a remote area.

A Mission for My Sins: Powerful defilers are alert for signs that a tree of life has awakened. If characters work directly or indirectly for a sorcerer-king, an NPC defiler, or a merchant house, or if they are templars or defilers themselves, they might have received clues to the tree's whereabouts. In that case, they've been commissioned to investigate and given the following information:

- There is reason to believe that a tree of life is growing in a region of sandy waste in the valleys east of the nearest major trade route.
- If the characters find such a tree, they should conceal its location and return as quickly as possible. If they find a seed, they should bring it back immediately.
- The signs of a tree are not easy to discern unless you know how to read them. In particular, primal forces in the area might be trying to draw attention to the tree, a fact that makes any unusual storms even more significant.
- It is likely that other groups are also aware of the tree's potential and are searching for it.

A Mission for Their Sins: This adventure hook develops along essentially the same lines as the situation above, except the characters are associated with the Veiled Alliance or a primal mentor such as a guardian druid. Alternatively, they could be approached by a neutral scholar whose divinations or prophetic interpretations have led him to suspect a tree of life's reappearance. In this case, they might be told (or might discover) any of the information above along with any of the following:

- Characters with a deep primal connection might have dreams that allude to the agitation and excitement of the primal spirits in the area where the tree exists.
- Portents point toward an artifact of great importance to the primal spirits arising in a region of sandy waste in the valleys east of the nearest major trade route.
- Odd storms have been seen on the horizon. Storms are a common occurrence, but these have been unnaturally small, stationary, and brief—almost as if some force is trying to draw attention to that area.
- It is essential that a tree or its seeds not fall into the hands of someone who might abuse its power. It would be better for a tree or seed to be destroyed than for it to be captured by a defiler.

What's That Storm?: The odd storms can also be spotted by the heroes rather than by nonplayer characters. A perfect time to introduce the storms is while the characters are traveling between city-states, either on their own or as part of a caravan. The storms can be observed intermittently over the course of several days and nights (lightning flashes are visible at night). If the characters are traveling with a caravan, indicate that most of the travelers are either unaware of the storms or pay no attention to them, but a few—templars or characters who have the look of defilers about them—do show an interest. If necessary, the characters can be approached surreptitiously by a fellow traveler who is a member of the Veiled Alliance. That character is interested in leaving the caravan to investigate the distant phenomenon and needs companions for safety.

1. A Storm of Revelation

Encounter Level 6 (1,250 XP)

Setup

2 bloodied tembos (T)

The characters are making their way across the desert when they encounter a supernatural dust storm. Two tembos are trapped in the storm. They were acting as scouts for a party of templars that is also searching the region for the tree (see Encounter 5). When the tembos got too close, the primal spirits that created the dust storm used it to trap the tembos, so that they are now battered and weak. They attack the characters in a manic rage. After defeating the beasts, the characters find a formerly buried cave entrance (X) that has been excavated by the storm.

As characters draw near to the storm, read:

The crimson sun sits low on the horizon. The heat of midday has receded, and nightfall approaches. The wind has been steadily increasing for the last hour when you see something flickering on the horizon. Moving cautiously closer, you see a towering cyclone of dust. The cyclone seems to be confined to a comparatively small area. Moving closer still, you catch glimpses of two low, rocky outcroppings swathed in the swirling dust. Between them, the wind circles in a way that you've never seen before.

If the characters move closer to inspect the storm, place the characters and the tembos as shown on the map and read:

You cover your mouths with thin cloths as shields against the choking dust as you move into the edges of the storm. Sparks of energy, possibly from agitated desert spirits, flicker throughout the dust, but they disappear too quickly for you to get a good look at them. Visibility is limited to a few yards, but occasionally, a gap in the dust lets you see much farther. You can make out the rock outcroppings and the flat area between them. Suddenly, something howls savagely ahead of you. From the whipping dust emerges the form of a snarling tembo. It is emaciated, scarred, and slightly unsteady on its feet, but its eyes gleam with ferocious desperation. A second howl, coming from behind you, rises above the shrieking wind.

Tembos are aberrant monsters, so characters can make Dungeoneering checks to gain information about them.

Dungeoneering Check

DC 15: *Tembos are vicious, aberrant creatures with dangerous auras. They are solitary creatures, so meeting a pair is almost unheard of. These two appear to be near starvation and badly hurt from long exposure to the storm.*

2 Tembos (T) — **Level 6 Solo Skirmisher**
Medium aberrant magical beast — **XP 1,250 each**

HP 280; **Bloodied** 140 — **Initiative** +7
(these tembos begin the encounter bloodied)
AC 20, **Fortitude** 20, **Reflex** 18, **Will** 16 — **Perception** +8
Speed 8 — Darkvision
Resist 5 necrotic
Saving Throws +5; **Action Points** 2

Traits

☼ **Killing Presence** (necrotic) ✦ **Aura** 2
Any enemy that starts its turn within the aura takes 5 necrotic damage.

☼ **Tainted Wounds** ✦ **Aura** 5
While the tembo is bloodied, enemies within the aura regain only half the normal hit points from healing effects.

Double Actions
At the start of combat, the tembo makes two initiative checks. The tembo takes a turn on both initiative counts.

Immovable
The tembo can ignore forced movement. When an attack would knock the tembo prone, the tembo can make a saving throw to remain standing.

Standard Actions

⊕ **Bite** ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +11 vs. AC
Hit: 2d10 + 3 damage, and the target takes a -2 penalty to attack rolls until the end of the tembo's next turn.

⸸ **Raking Assault** ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +11 vs. AC
Hit: 2d10 + 3 damage, and the tembo shifts up to 4 squares and then uses *bite*.

Minor Actions

Blending (illusion) ✦ **Encounter**
Effect: The tembo becomes invisible until it attacks or until the end of its next turn.

Triggered Actions

⸸ **Unspeakable Violation** (necrotic) ✦ **Recharge** ⚅
Trigger: The tembo hits an enemy with *bite*.
Attack (Free Action): Melee 1 (triggering enemy): +9 vs. Fortitude
Hit: The target loses a healing surge, and the tembo's *killing presence* aura deals 10 necrotic damage instead of 5 necrotic damage until the start of the tembo's next turn.

Shadow Evasion ✦ **Recharge** when first bloodied
Trigger: An enemy hits the tembo with a melee or a ranged attack.
Effect (Immediate Reaction): The tembo shifts 4 squares and then becomes insubstantial until the end of the triggering enemy's next turn.

Skills Stealth +10

Str 19 (+7)	**Dex** 15 (+5)	**Wis** 11 (+3)
Con 14 (+5)	**Int** 13 (+4)	**Cha** 9 (+2)

Alignment chaotic evil **Languages** Common

Tactics

Tembos are dangerous predators. These, however, are already bloodied from days spent trapped in the storm.

The tembos get into melee as quickly as possible and try to keep the characters within striking range. They are starving and desperate, so they won't hesitate to risk opportunity attacks to get into advantageous positions. Because they start the encounter bloodied, they can't recharge *shadow evasion* after using it.

Features of the Area

Illumination: The sand kicked up by the storm limits visibility to 6 squares, but brief intervals of clarity allow the characters to discern the locations of the cacti, boulders, and cliffs.

Cacti: The large cacti shown provide partial cover and fully occupy their squares.

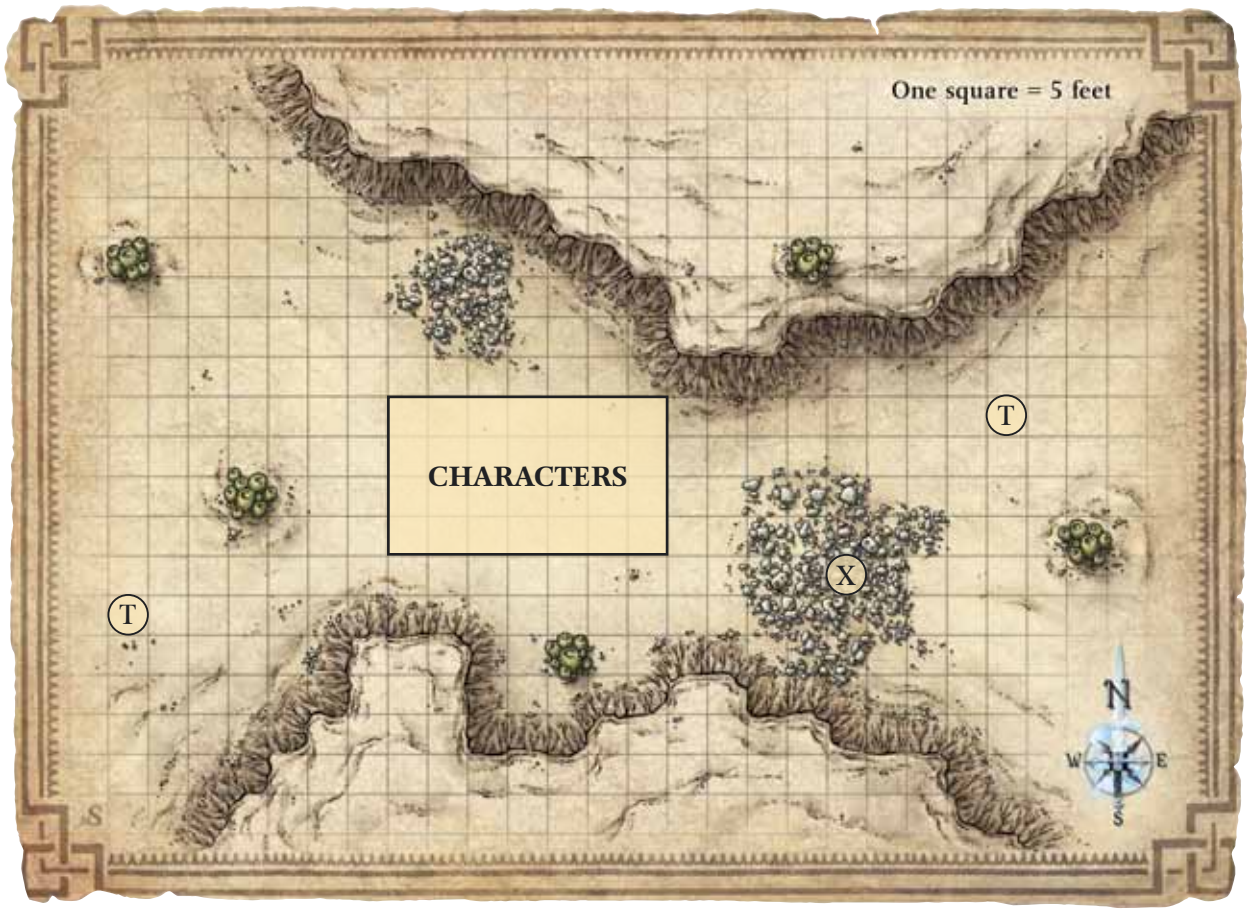
Exposed Boulders: The wind has exposed areas of sharp, clustered boulders that are difficult terrain.

Cliff: The cliffs are 10 feet high. A DC 15 Athletics check is required to climb up or down.

Wind: While the storm wind is blowing, every character must make a DC 16 Endurance check at the start of his or her turn. Characters who fail slide 2 squares in a random direction (roll 1d8 to determine). The tembos are immune to this effect, thanks to their *immovable* trait.

Changing the Situation

After the first round of combat against the tembos, characters can begin a set of connected skill checks, if they pick up on the clues.



Before the second round of combat begins, read: *The tembos and the cyclone wind howl together, echoing each other in an unnatural call and response. When a particularly strong gust whips the gully, the beasts bellow in pain.*

Depending on what they were told before coming to this area, players might correctly identify the sandstorm as a creation of primal spirits. Characters can also make skill checks as minor actions during their turns to gain the following information.

Arcana (DC 24): The primal energy of this place is focused somewhere near the larger (eastern) clump of exposed boulders.

History (DC 16): Ancient forces sometimes rise up from the land to reveal things that they want known.

Nature (DC 24): Supernatural storms such as this one are sometimes created by primal forces to draw the attention of passing creatures.

Perception (DC 16): The wind is swirling around a stationary point in the larger clump of boulders. (The spot is marked with an "X" on the map.)

The center of the storm is difficult to pinpoint from inside the ravine but is obvious to anyone who climbs to the top of either ledge. When a character first moves to within 6 squares of the boulders (the limit of visibility in the storm), let that character make either a Perception check or a Nature check. The DC is 16 if the character is atop one of the ledges or 24 if the character is at ground level. If that check succeeds, the character spots a green, growing vine in the still air at the center of the storm. The vine is a remarkable sight in these surroundings.

If the vine is noticed, read:

You see what appears to be a vibrant, green vine growing out of the sand. The swirling dust and buffeting wind make it difficult to see much more than that. As you stare at it, the storm seems to wane a bit, and the howling of the tembos becomes less agitated.

At the start of the next round after a character spots the vine, the storm's intensity drops sharply. When that happens, the tembos become weakened until the end of the encounter, and characters no longer need to make Endurance checks to avoid being slid by the wind. Blowing dust still limits visibility to 6 squares.

Development

After the characters defeat the tembos, the sandstorm gradually ebbs. By the end of a short rest, the air is calm. Anyone investigating the tembos' bodies discovers that they are wearing collars.

If no one noticed the vine during the fight, it can be spotted automatically once the air clears.

When the characters have a chance to examine the vine, read:

The storm cleared much of the sand from a clump of boulders in the ravine. Among the freshly exposed rocks, you see a green vine pushing up through a crack between the rocks. Looking closer, you see that the crack the vine emerges from what could be the edge of a stone trapdoor, almost perfectly blended into the surrounding stone.

Depending on which of the adventure hooks you've used, the characters might sense that primal spirits are pleased about this discovery. Alternatively, the discovery might match the description given to them by their superiors.

When the characters pry up the stone, read:

You find that the door comes open with surprising ease. Even more surprisingly, you see a vibrant carpet of moss ringing the inside of the entrance. No light comes from the opening, but the air smells faintly of honey and citrus. A tunnel slants down into darkness.

If the adventurers are using mounts or pack animals, they must leave them somewhere outside. The entrance is too low and narrow to allow passage by any beast that can carry a human. This might have consequences in Encounter 5.

2. An Entrance Long Awaited

Encounter Level 8 (1,678 XP)

Setup

2 raaig tomb spirits (R)
6 ashen crawlers (A)
1 spectral kirre (K)

Shortly after the characters advance into the ancient refuge, they are confronted by some of its undead guardians. The guardians (two raaig tomb spirits, a spectral kirre, and six ashen crawlers) warn the heroes that they are forbidden from entering and move aggressively against the intruders. If the characters respond to the warnings, a skill challenge is triggered during the combat. If characters succeed at that skill challenge, they persuade the guardians to let them pass.

When the characters open the tomb's entrance, sunlight streams in for the first time in millennia. The undead guardians take up defensive positions as shown on the map. All of them have total concealment at the beginning of the encounter. The ashen crawlers cling to the ceiling. If characters move cautiously down the sloping entryway, the two characters in the lead can make DC 24 Perception checks to hear faint scraping sounds or to notice odd shadows ahead.

When the characters reach the room, read:
The sloping entrance leads into a dark chamber. Skeletons litter the floor, and rotted weapons of ancient design are scattered among them. The walls are covered in growing vines.

2 Raaig Tomb Spirits (R)	Level 9 Soldier
Medium natural humanoid (undead)	XP 400 each
HP 66; **Bloodied** 33	**Initiative** +9
AC 23, **Fortitude** 22, **Reflex** 21, **Will** 21	**Perception** +11
Speed 6, fly 6 (hover); phasing	Darkvision
Immune disease, poison; **Resist** insubstantial	
Traits	
☼ **Gripping Dread** (cold, fear) ✦ **Aura** 1	
Enemies within the aura cannot shift. In addition, any enemy marked by the tomb spirit that makes an attack that does not include the tomb spirit as a target while within the aura takes 5 cold damage.	
Standard Actions	
⊕ **Chilling Blade** (cold) ✦ **At-Will**	
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +14 vs. AC	
Hit: 3d6 + 7 cold damage.	
Minor Actions	
✧ **Raaig's Challenge** (charm) ✦ **At-Will** (1/round)	
Attack: Close burst 3 (one enemy in the burst); +12 vs. Will	
Hit: The tomb spirit pulls the target 2 squares, and the target is marked until the end of the tomb spirit's next turn.	
Skills Religion +11, Stealth +12	
Str 20 (+9) **Dex** 17 (+7) **Wis** 15 (+6)	
Con 15 (+6) **Int** 14 (+6) **Cha** 16 (+7)	
Alignment unaligned **Languages** Common	

Suddenly, a rasping voice calls out. "Leafnes, ambitmeges of Nibenay. We laestan to Avor Faeroath, voo nerians gafolmanug ond his Treow."

The language is an ancient and highly formal dialect of Common, so old that it is nearly a different language. Each character can attempt either a DC 16 History check or a DC 16 Arcana check to get the gist of the message. Anyone who scores 24 or higher on the check understands the message clearly.

6 Ashen Crawlers (A)	Level 8 Minion Soldier
Medium natural animate (undead)	XP 88 each
HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion.	**Initiative** +8
AC 24, **Fortitude** 22, **Reflex** 20, Will 19	**Perception** +7
Speed 6, climb 8 (spider climb)	Darkvision
Immune petrification	
Traits	
Cruel Claws	
Whenever an enemy leaves a square adjacent to the ashen crawler, that enemy takes 4 damage.	
Lurking Presence	
The ashen crawler gains a +10 bonus to Stealth checks against enemies' passive Perception.	
Standard Actions	
⊕ Claw ✦ At-Will	
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +13 vs. AC	
Hit: 8 damage.	
Skills Athletics +14, Stealth +11	
Str 20 (+9) **Dex** 15 (+6) **Wis** 16 (+7)	
Con 15 (+6) **Int** 5 (+1) **Cha** 11 (+4)	
Alignment evil **Languages** Primordial	

If someone rolls 24 or higher, read the verbatim translation:
"Be gone, servants of Nibenay. We harken to Avor Firesworn, who defends still this refuge and its tree."

If no one rolls 24 or higher but at least one player rolls 16 or higher, read the rough translation:
The voice addressed you as servants of Nibenay and told you to leave. It also mentioned someone called Avor Firesworn, but the context was unclear.

Unless the characters retreat up the tunnel, the guardians attack. Attempts at negotiation can trigger the skill challenge described below.

Spectral Kirre (K)	Level 8 Soldier
Medium shadow beast (undead)	XP 350
HP 89; **Bloodied** 44	**Initiative** +11
AC 24, **Fortitude** 20, **Reflex** 22, **Will** 21	**Perception** +6
Speed 0, fly 6 (hover); phasing	Darkvision
Immune disease, poison; **Resist** 10 necrotic	

Traits

Insubstantial

The kirre takes half damage from all attacks, except those that deal force damage. Whenever the kirre takes radiant damage, it loses this trait until the start of its next turn.

Standard Actions

Spectral Claw (necrotic) ✦ **At-Will**

Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +11 vs. Fortitude

Hit: 2d8 + 2 necrotic damage, and the target grants combat advantage and takes ongoing 5 necrotic damage (save ends both).

Effect: The kirre marks the target until the end of the kirre's next turn.

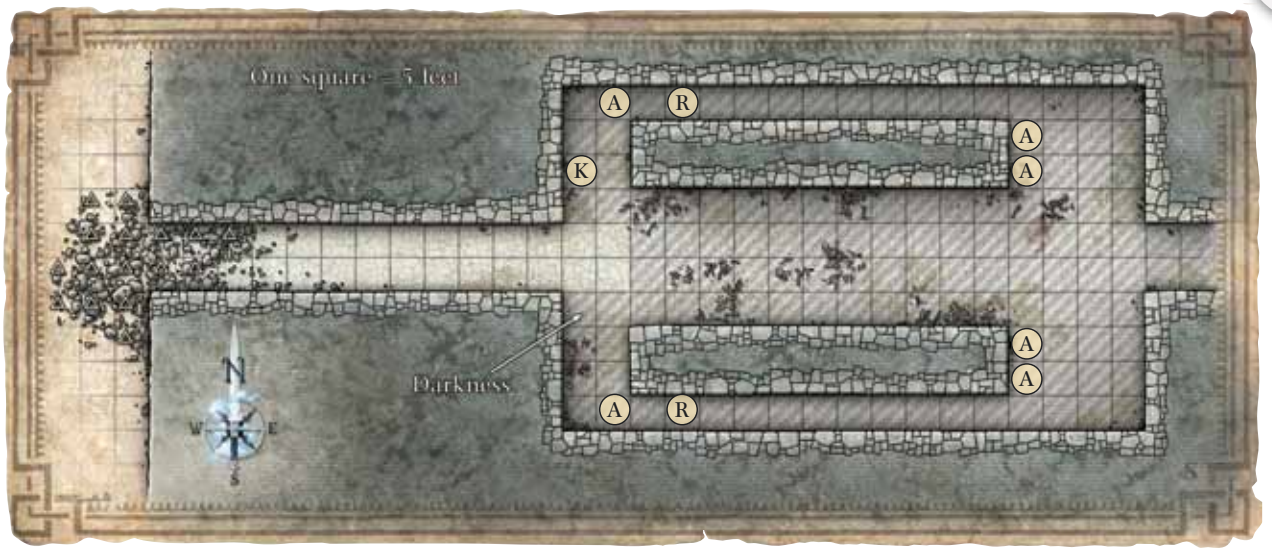
Lonely Death (illusion) ✦ **Recharge** ⚅ ⚄ ⚃

Effect: The kirre uses *spectral claw*. If the attack hits, all creatures except the kirre are invisible to the target (save ends).

Skills Stealth +14

Str 15 (+6)	**Dex** 20 (+9)	**Wis** 15 (+6)
Con 17 (+7)	**Int** 14 (+6)	**Cha** 19 (+8)

Alignment evil **Languages** Common



Features of the Area

Illumination: Enough sunlight comes from the entrance that the rest of the room is in dim light. The area directly at the bottom of the entryway (marked on the map) is brightly lit.

Terrain: Although the floor is littered with skeletons, their ancient gear, and drifted sand, none of it obstructs movement or constitutes difficult terrain. At the eastern end of the hall, two large stone doors lie shattered on the floor.

Ceiling: The ceiling is 10 feet high, meaning that melee attacks are possible between characters on the ground and crawlers on the ceiling.

Tactics

The ashen crawlers move along the ceiling (using spider climb) while looking for opportunities to attack vulnerable characters. They climb down the walls only when necessary, and they avoid the sunlit area at all costs.

The spectral kirre has total concealment at the start of the encounter. It uses *lonely death* to either focus on a weaker target or to draw attention away from an ally under heavy attack.

Raaigs use *raaig's challenge* to pull enemies within range of *chilling blade* and their *gripping dread* auras. They use phasing to move back and forth in the long hallways to escape danger.

Negotiating with the Guardians

The tomb spirits' names are Hakeem Varum and Friem Corom. They have waited millennia to defend this entrance against attack by Nibenay's soldiers and are eager to perform their duty. They are not hateful, however, and are willing to listen to reason. Characters can try to explain that they are not servants of Nibenay and hence do not constitute a threat. The tomb spirits continue fighting while negotiation takes place, and it should be clear to players that the tomb spirits are listening even while they fight.

Level: 8 (350 XP)

Complexity: 1 (requires 4 successes before 3 failures)

Time Frame: Each character can make a check in this challenge once per round as a minor action.

Primary Skills: Bluff, Diplomacy, History, Nature.

Bluff (DC 24; two successes maximum): The tomb spirits are not easily misled, but they can be tricked if characters offer a plausible lie, such as claiming to have been called here by Avor.

Diplomacy (DC 16; three successes maximum): The tomb spirits are not vindictive, and they will listen to reason. If a character expresses hatred toward Nibenay, claims to be a protector of the tree, or mentions the primal spirits favorably, the player gets a +2 bonus on that skill check.

History or Nature (DC 16; two successes maximum): The hero relates a particular fact about Nibenay, the ancient genocides, or a tree of life that suggests to the tomb spirits that the characters have come to protect the tree.

Special: The tomb spirits cannot be intimidated. Any attempt to use Intimidate during the skill challenge automatically results in one failure.

During the exchange, paraphrase the following remarks by the tomb spirits or add similar dialogue of your own.

- "How can we know that you are not part of Nibenay's defilers, sent here to finish your work of destruction?"
- [*One of the raaigs speaking to the other*] "Do not listen to them, brother. They speak only lies."
- "I am Hakeem Varum. Even in death, I will defend our sacred tree."
- "After so long an age of waiting, we can take no chances. Any creature with sentience is but a defiler in waiting."

Success: One of the raaigs becomes convinced that the characters have come to relieve him of his obligation to protect the tree. The one that has more hit points raises its weapon in salute, then dissipates into the afterlife.

If the characters succeed at the challenge, read:
One of the wraiths lifts its blade overhead and dips its withered head toward you. It calls out in the ancient tongue, but its voice is distant, and you cannot make out the words. It motions toward the back of the chamber as it fades from view like a wisp of smoke.

The other spirit hisses angrily; it's clear that further negotiation will not succeed with it.

Failure: The raaigs believe that the characters are part of Nibenay's army returning to finish their job.

If the characters fail the challenge, read:
"Your lies betray you! We have waited through uncounted ages for your return, but you will never bring the tree to your master Nibenay." It is clear that further negotiation would be useless.

Development

The victors in the ancient battle took most of the items of value from this chamber, but a DC 16 Perception check while searching among the skeletons turns up ritual scrolls of Animal Messenger and Comprehend Language as well as two exquisitely carved silver pendants; each portrays a silhouette of a lion's head and is worth 1,250 gp. A DC 24 History check recalls that ancient cults revered a lion-headed giant named Taraskir who was renowned for wisdom and bravery.

At the east end of the chamber, stone fragments on the floor show that two heavy doors were smashed into the corridor beyond untold ages ago. A hallway leads eastward into darkness. The walls are finished and smooth at this end, but gradually they become rough, natural stone.

Clusters of thin vines grow out of this corridor, across the chamber, and out the entrance.

3. Competitors?

Encounter Level 7 (1,650 XP)

Setup

1 thri-kreen desert talker (T)
2 thri-kreen maulers (M)
2 thri-kreen scouts (S)

The hallway from Encounter 2 extends about 120 feet, then opens into a moist, natural cavern. Characters encounter a group of thri-kreen here, who also seek the tree. Like the player characters, the thri-kreen were drawn to the area by the storm, and they found a second entrance through a narrow cleft in the rocks. The thri-kreen are suspicious and xenophobic, but they can be negotiated with. If provoked, however, they attack with zealous fury.

When the characters reach the entrance to the chamber (from the west), read:
You are entering a large, natural cavern. A thick carpet of glowing moss covers the floor and walls. The air is cool and sweet with moisture and the smell of flowers. Pools of water stand in shallow depressions, and you hear water trickling down the walls.

Give the heroes some time to explore, then ask everyone to place themselves on the map where their characters would be in the cavern. Then place the thri-kreen savages as shown on the map.

When all characters are positioned, read:
From the dark passage to the north, you hear faint clicking sounds. A thri-kreen with a mottled brown, yellow, and green hide steps from the shadows and faces you. More thri-kreen are behind it in the tunnel, but it's impossible to see how many. The one in front speaks in a clicking form of Common, saying, "Our clutch has come for the life-seed. Drop your pointed sticks and depart, or we consume your hind-limb meat."

The thri-kreen move cautiously into the cavern in a defensive formation. Characters can negotiate with the thri-kreen or attack, but the thri-kreen cannot be surprised. If the characters attack, then the thri-kreen do not respond to entreaties (unlike the undead in Encounter 2, who were willing to talk while fighting).

Negotiation

The thri-kreen are innately suspicious, but they are not immediately hostile. They have come to protect the tree of life, and its safety and survival are their only concerns. Characters who negotiate diplomatically can gain useful allies here.

This is a perfect opportunity for roleplaying through an encounter; encourage players to engage the thri-kreen as their characters would.

You can use the following skill challenge to guide the negotiation. Call for skill checks when the characters' statements and actions make a skill check appropriate. If characters resolve the encounter

Chao-ka, Thri-Kreen Desert Talker (T)	**Level 8 Controller**
Medium natural humanoid	**XP 350**
HP 88; **Bloodied** 44	**Initiative** +6
AC 22, **Fortitude** 19, **Reflex** 20, **Will** 21	**Perception** +9
Speed 7	Low-light vision
Standard Actions	
Claw ✦ At-Will	
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +13 vs. AC	
Hit: 2d6 + 6 damage.	
Shuriken (weapon) **✦ At-Will**	
Attack: Ranged 10/20 (one or two creatures); +13 vs. AC	
Hit: 2d4 + 4 damage.	
Shifting Dune Rend ✦ At-Will	
Attack: Area burst 1 within 10 (enemies in the burst); +11 vs. Reflex	
Hit: The target falls prone.	
Effect: The desert talker slides the target 2 squares.	
Desert Tempest ✦ Recharge when first bloodied	
Attack: Close blast 5 (enemies in the blast); +11 vs. Reflex	
Hit: 1d6 + 5 damage, and the desert talker pushes the target 2 squares. In addition, the target is blinded (save ends).	
Move Actions	
Mantis Jump ✦ Encounter	
Effect: The desert talker jumps a number of squares equal to its speed. This movement does not provoke opportunity attacks.	
Minor Actions	
Sand Trap ✦ Recharge when all this power's sand traps have ended	
Effect: The desert talker creates sand traps in three unoccupied squares within 10 squares of it. The sand traps must be created on a solid surface. Until the end of the encounter, any enemy that enters a sand trap's square is restrained until the end of its next turn, and that sand trap disappears.	
Skills Diplomacy +12, Insight +14, Nature +14	
Str 12 (+5) **Dex** 14 (+6) **Wis** 20 (+9)	
Con 16 (+7) **Int** 18 (+8) **Cha** 17 (+7)	
Alignment unaligned **Languages** Common, Thri-Kreen	
Equipment 10 shuriken	

through the skill challenge, they earn XP for the skill challenge but not for defeating the thri-kreen.

Level: 8 (350 XP)

Complexity: 1 (requires 4 successes before 3 failures, but see ""Success and Failure"" below).

Time Frame: Each character can make a check in this challenge as a standard action unless otherwise noted.

Primary Skills: Bluff, Diplomacy, Insight.

Bluff (DC 24; two successes maximum): The thri-kreen are edgy and on their guard against tricks, so trying to bluff them is difficult.

Diplomacy or Insight (DC 24; three successes maximum for each skill): Anyone who is not a thri-kreen finds the attitudes and reactions of thri-kreen difficult to assess. The DC for these two skill checks is 16 if the skill is being used by a thri-kreen player character.

Secondary Skills: History, Nature, Religion.

The DC for secondary skill checks is 16. Each time a secondary skill check succeeds, the next character to make a primary skill check gets a +2 bonus on the roll.

Special Skills: Arcana, Intimidate.

Arcana: The thri-kreen distrust arcane magic in every form. If someone tries to use the Arcana skill or uses a power with the arcane keyword during the challenge—even in an attempt to prove that they aren't defilers—the characters automatically earn one failure.

Intimidate (DC 16): The thri-kreen are zealots on a mission, and they cannot be intimidated. If an Intimidate check fails, the thri-kreen simply ignore the effort as empty posturing. If it succeeds, they aren't intimidated, and they become less willing to listen to anything the characters have to say. From then on, every skill check that the characters make as part of this skill challenge takes a -2 penalty until the end of the encounter. Each additional successful Intimidate check worsens the penalty by 2.

Use your judgment about how often secondary skills can be used. For example, you might decide that there are only two History-related tidbits about trees of life that the thri-kreen care about.

2 Thri-Kreen Maulers (M) — **Level 8 Brute**
Medium natural humanoid — XP 350 each

HP 105; **Bloodied** 52 — **Initiative** +9
AC 21, **Fortitude** 20, **Reflex** 21, **Will** 19 — **Perception** +11
Speed 6 — Low-light vision

Standard Actions

Claw ✦ At-Will
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +13 vs. AC
Hit: 1d8 + 5 damage.

Chatkcha (weapon) **✦ At-Will**
Attack: Ranged 6/12 (one creature); +13 vs. AC
Hit: 4d6 + 5 damage.

Mauler Frenzy ✦ Recharge ⚅ ⚄ ⚃
Effect: The mauler uses *claw* twice, or three times while bloodied.

Mauler Leap ✦ Recharge when first bloodied
Effect: The mauler jumps 6 squares and then uses *claw* twice. It gains a +1 bonus to attack rolls and a +4 bonus to damage rolls for these attacks. This movement does not provoke the opportunity attacks.

Move Actions

Mantis Jump ✦ Encounter
Effect: The mauler jumps 6 squares. This movement does not provoke opportunity attacks.

Minor Actions

Pain Amplification (psychic) **✦ At-Will** (1/round)
Attack: Melee 1 (one bloodied creature the mauler hit this turn with *claw*); +11 vs. Fortitude
Hit: Ongoing 5 psychic damage (save ends).

Skills Athletics +13, Nature +12, Stealth +14

Str 18 (+8)	**Dex** 20 (+9)	**Wis** 16 (+7)
Con 15 (+6)	**Int** 10 (+4)	**Cha** 8 (+3)

Alignment unaligned — **Languages** Common, Thri-Kreen
Equipment hide armor, 2 chatkchas

2 Thri-Kreen Scouts (S) — **Level 7 Skirmisher**
Medium natural humanoid — XP 300 each

HP 80; **Bloodied** 40 — **Initiative** +9
AC 21, **Fortitude** 20, **Reflex** 20, **Will** 18 — **Perception** +10
Speed 8 — Low-light vision

Standard Actions

Spear (weapon) **✦ At-Will**
Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); +12 vs. AC
Hit: 2d8 + 5 damage.

Shuriken (weapon) **✦ At-Will**
Attack: Ranged 10/20 (one creature); +12 vs. AC
Hit: 2d4 + 7 damage.

Leaping Strike (weapon) **✦ At-Will**
Effect: The scout moves its speed and makes the following attack at any point during the move.
Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); +12 vs. AC
Hit: 3d8 + 5 damage.

Move Actions

Mantis Jump ✦ Encounter
Effect: The scout jumps a number of squares equal to its speed. This movement does not provoke opportunity attacks.

Triggered Actions

Sudden Recoil ✦ At-Will
Trigger: The scout is hit by an attack.
Effect (Immediate Reaction): The scout shifts 1 square (or 4 squares if the attack bloodies the scout).

Psionic Boost (psychic) **✦ Recharge** ⚄ ⚃
Trigger: The scout hits with *spear* or *shuriken*.
Effect (Free Action): The attack deals 2d6 extra psychic damage.

Skills Athletics +12, Endurance +11

Str 19 (+7)	**Dex** 18 (+7)	**Wis** 15 (+5)
Con 16 (+6)	**Int** 14 (+5)	**Cha** 11 (+3)

Alignment unaligned — **Languages** Common, Thri-Kreen
Equipment spear, 10 shuriken

Responses by the Thri-kreen

The desert talker's name is Chao-ka (meaning Life Hound in their dialect). He does all the speaking for his group; none of the others speak Common or even the dialect of Thri-Kreen that is spoken in the Tablelands. If one of the player characters is a thri-kreen, Chao-ka addresses all of his comments to that character, regardless of who takes the lead in the negotiation. If none of the characters are thri-kreen but someone speaks their language, Chao-ka prefers to address that character in his own language. He will speak Common if it is the only mutual language.

A character who speaks Thri-Kreen will recognize Chao-ka's speech as a dialect that is spoken by clutches living far to the west. It is seldom heard east of the Ringing Mountains.

Chao-ka explains that he and his followers were led to this place by dreams of a seed that could initiate a new age of growth in his home region. They have traveled far and suffered many hardships, but they are prepared to do whatever they must to retrieve the seed. If Chao-ka is persuaded that the heroes have similar intentions, then he will cooperate with them.

Use these talking points to construct responses to the characters' negotiation attempts.

- "Our clutch followed the spirit smells to this place. A life seed is here, but its source tree is ancient."
- "The past told us that humans must not have the life seed. They will use it for the deep death [defiling]."
- "We could trust only the clutch. No others understood the spirit smells."
- "We will freely give all the life that we have to protect the seed."
- "The stink of death and fire came from below. The seed has been protected."
- "The clutch does not remember a stronger life scent in all memory; this seed has no price."
- "We will take the seed to Ka-la-tak, where much death was in the ground. The seed will be a new time of growing. This was our sacred duty."
- "There are others who seek this place. We felt their footsteps on the sand. We felt them now. We must be strength and speed."
- "There are other lands with much deep death. The seed could be used at those places, but Ka-la-tak is our sacred duty. It is far away from your defiler kings, and safe."

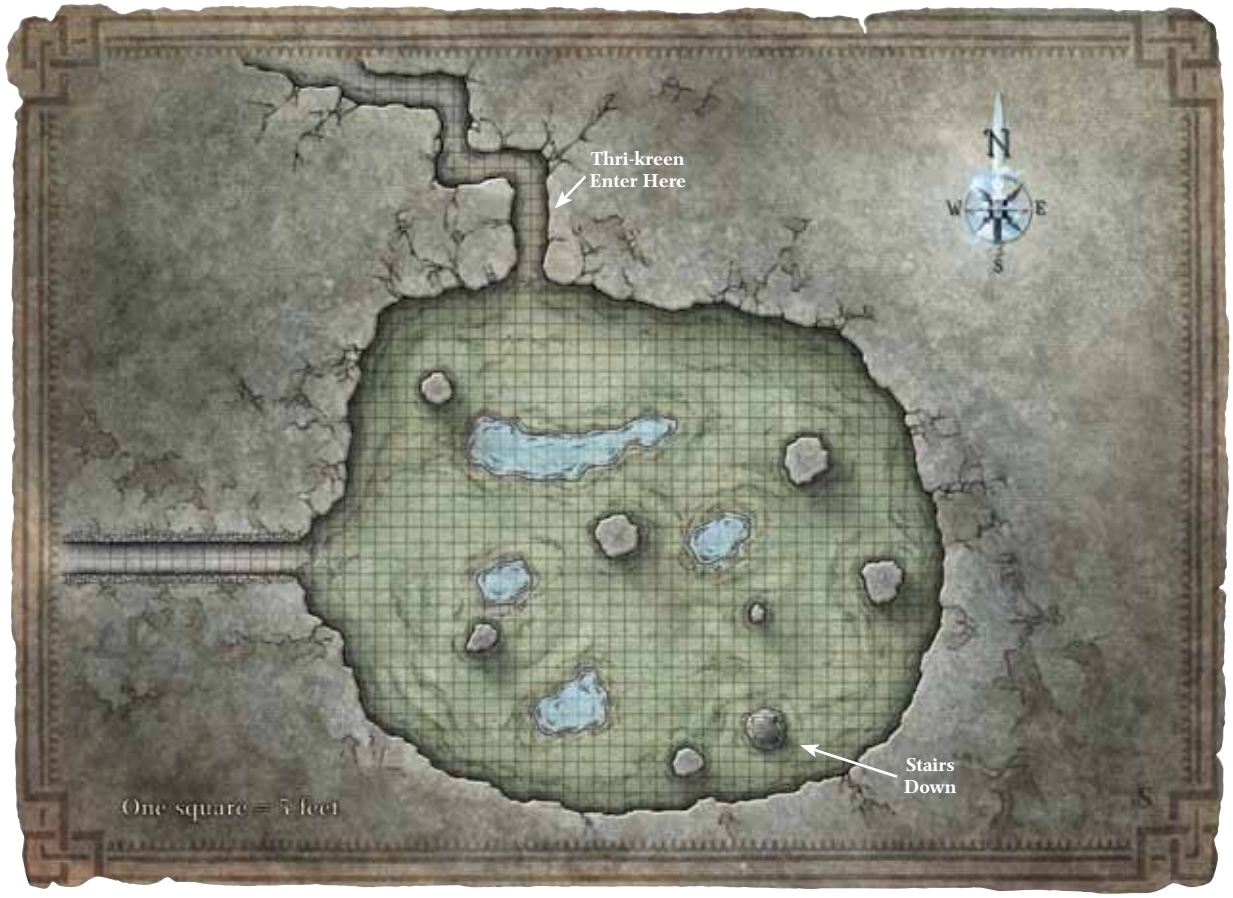
Success and Failure

The characters' goal is to achieve four successes before three failures, but they can gain some benefits from even a partial success on the skill challenge, depending on how many successes they earned before gaining their third failure.

4 Successes: The thri-kreen are willing to cooperate with the characters, and they are sincere allies. Chao-ka suggests that one of the maulers and one of the scouts remain here to guard the exits while he and the other two accompany the characters to the next chamber. These three can be treated as companion characters to the heroes. The thri-kreen are even willing to let the characters take possession of the seed, provided they are convinced that the characters intend to plant it someplace safe. Otherwise, they will be happy to take it to Ka-la-tak (which can be anywhere you want it to be) or some other place devoid of life. If the characters made a successful Intimidate check during the negotiation, however, or if any of their four successes came through Bluff and their lies are discovered, then the thri-kreen look for any opportunity to take the seed for themselves, even if doing so means betraying the characters.

3 Successes: The thri-kreen are not about to give up their goal of possessing the seed and planting it at Ka-la-tak. They are willing to let the characters help them recover the seed, but they are not willing to let the characters keep it. Chao-ka suggests that one of the maulers and one of the scouts remain here to guard the exits while everyone else investigates the next chamber. As the combat in Encounter 4 comes to an end, Chao-ka whistles up the passageway to summon the two thri-kreen who stayed behind. Once all the thri-kreen are together, Chao-ka insists on taking the seed, and he and his followers will fight for it if necessary.

2 Successes or Fewer: Chao-ka concludes that, at best, the characters can't be trusted, and at worst, they are either defilers or are working for defilers. If the characters refuse to lay down their weapons, the thri-kreen attack.



Features of the Area

Illumination: Faintly glowing moss provides dim light.

North Tunnel: From inside the cavern, this entrance looks nearly identical to the west tunnel. After about 200 feet, many twists and turns, and numerous narrow crawlspaces, the passage becomes a chimney ascending 40 feet almost straight up to the surface. The thri-kreen left a rope there (DC 10 to climb), but the templars in Encounter 5 will remove it. The upper end of the chimney leads to a hidden cleft in a jumble of boulders that was scoured clean by swirling wind, just like the entrance the characters used but forming a well instead of a ramp.

Pillars: Large pillars provide cover.

Pools of Water: The water in the pools is 1 to 3 feet deep and constitutes difficult terrain.

Stairs: Spiral stairs lead down to a sloping tunnel. Thin, fragile vines grow up this staircase and out both of the other exits from this chamber.

Tactics

The maulers move to engage the enemy while the scouts and the desert talker keep their distance. All of them concentrate their attacks against the same targets if possible, in an effort to bring down one enemy after another.

Aftermath

If the encounter becomes a battle, none of the thri-kreen will be cooperative as prisoners. A DC 24 Diplomacy or Intimidate check reveals some of the information described above. In particular, characters can still be told about the scent of fire and death rising up the staircase and the fact that others are nearby and seeking the tree. The thri-kreen carry coins and gems worth 1,100 gp, and the desert talker has a ritual scroll of Comprehend Language.

4. Cycles of Life

Encounter Level 12 (3,800 XP)

Setup

Avor Firesworn (F)
8 skeletal legionaries (S)
4 crawling guardians (G)

The adventurers enter the final portion of the ancient refuge and confront Avor Firesworn. Assuming that they defeat him, they can pluck the last seed from the ancient, dying tree of life and become its caretakers.

The characters enter from the spiral staircase to the west. Set up the occupants in their locations.

8 Skeletal Legionaries (S) — **Level 7 Minion Soldier**
Medium natural animate (undead) — **XP 75 each**

HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion. **Initiative** +9
AC 23, **Fortitude** 20, **Reflex** 20, **Will** 18 **Perception** +5
Speed 5 Darkvision
Immune disease, poison; **Resist** 10 necrotic

Standard Actions

Longsword (weapon) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +12 vs. AC
Hit: 7 damage.
Effect: The legionary marks the target until the end of the legionary's next turn.

Javelin (weapon) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Ranged 20 (one creature); +12 vs. AC
Hit: 7 damage.
Effect: The legionary marks the target until the end of the legionary's next turn.

Str 18 (+7)	**Dex** 19 (+7)	**Wis** 14 (+5)
Con 16 (+6)	**Int** 3 (-1)	**Cha** 3 (-1)

Alignment unaligned **Languages** –
Equipment scale armor, heavy shield, longsword, 3 javelins

Avor Firesworn, Ashen Soul (F) — **Level 11 Elite Artillery (Leader)**
Medium natural animate (undead) — **XP 1,200**

HP 182; **Bloodied** 91 **Initiative** +10
AC 25, **Fortitude** 23, **Reflex** 24, **Will** 22 **Perception** +8
Speed 6, fly 6 (hover) Darkvision
Immune disease, poison; **Resist** 10 fire; **Vulnerable** 10 cold
Saving Throws +2; **Action Points** 1

Traits

Defiling Aura (necrotic) ✦ **Aura** 3
Effect: Enemies who end their turn in the aura take 5 necrotic damage.

Standard Actions

Fiery Tendrils (fire) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Ranged 15 (one or two creatures); +16 vs. Reflex
Hit: 4d6 + 5 fire damage.

Heat Blast (fire) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Close blast 3 (creatures in the blast); +14 vs. Fortitude
Hit: 3d6 + 4 fire damage, and Avor can push the target 1 square.

Triggered Actions

Spiteful Defiling ✦ **Encounter**
Trigger: An enemy within 10 squares of Avor spends a healing surge.
Attack (Immediate Reaction): Close burst 10 (triggering enemy in the burst); +14 vs. Will
Hit: The target loses a healing surge, and Avor gains temporary hit points equal to the target's healing surge value.

Str 13 (+6)	**Dex** 20 (+10)	**Wis** 16 (+8)
Con 19 (+9)	**Int** 20 (+10)	**Cha** 15 (+7)

Alignment evil **Languages** Common, telepathy 15

4 Crawling Guardians (G) — **Level 10 Brute**
Medium natural beast (swarm) — **XP 500 each**

HP 128; **Bloodied** 64 **Initiative** +9
AC 22, **Fortitude** 22, **Reflex** 22, **Will** 20 **Perception** +7
Speed 6, climb 6 (spider climb) Darkvision
Resist half damage from melee and ranged attacks;
Vulnerable 5 to close and area attacks

Traits

Blood Frenzy ✦ **Aura** 1
Any enemy that starts its turn in the aura takes ongoing 5 damage (save ends). If that enemy is already taking untyped ongoing damage, that damage increases by 5.

Swarm
The swarm can occupy the same space as another creature, and an enemy can enter its space, which is difficult terrain. The swarm cannot be pulled, pushed, or slid by melee or ranged attacks. It can squeeze through any opening that is large enough for a Tiny creature.

Standard Actions

Swarm of Claws ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +15 vs. AC
Hit: 3d6 + 1 damage, and ongoing 5 damage (save ends).

Triggered Actions

Grasping Claws ✦ **At-Will**
Trigger: An enemy moves away from the swarm.
Effect (Immediate Reaction): The swarm moves up to its speed to the triggering enemy's square or a square adjacent to that enemy. This movement does not provoke opportunity attacks.

Skills Stealth +14

Str 10 (+5)	**Dex** 19 (+9)	**Wis** 14 (+7)
Con 18 (+9)	**Int** 1 (+0)	**Cha** 4 (+2)

Alignment unaligned **Languages** –

When the characters can see into this chamber, read:

The spiral stairs open into a cool, fresh cavern that is blanketed with growing plants. Grass covers the floor, and vines cling to the walls and dangle from the ceiling. Water pours from two small fountains carved in the shape of a lion's head. A beautiful and ancient conifer tree stands at the far end of the room, and a faint green radiance seems to emanate from it.

In contrast to that idyllic scene, several skeletons stand at attention. Their empty, malevolent eye sockets are turned directly toward you. Other forms that seem to be composed of little more than the desiccated remains of dismembered and mummified arms, legs, and hands drag themselves across the room.

Hovering in front of the tree is a humanoid figure. What remains of its flesh and its ancient armor are blackened and charred. Fire crackles from its burnt fingers, and its voice echoes telepathically in your heads. "Doth Nibenay still desire to torment us after so long an age? We welcome you, and we shall render unto you the wages of hate that we have nursed these many long years."

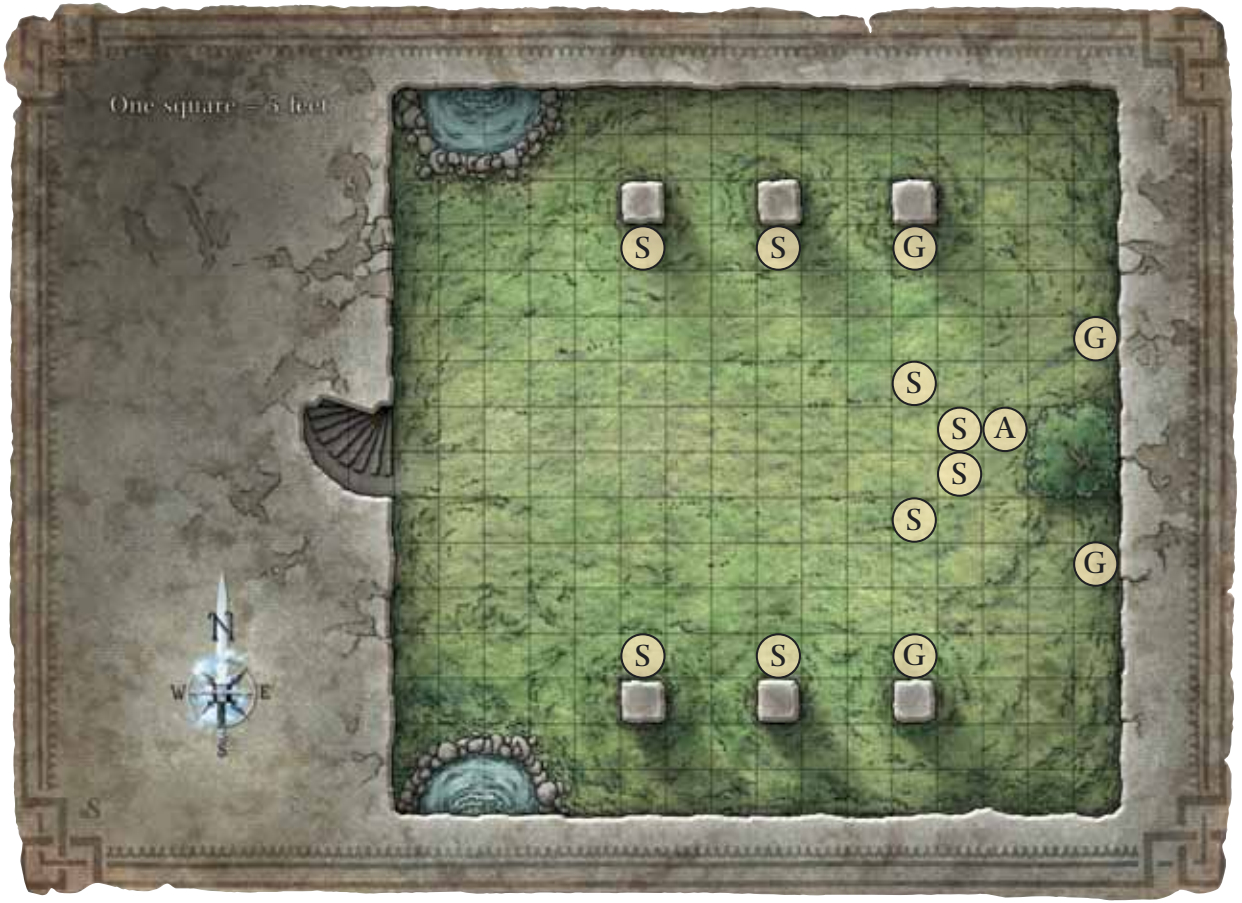
Avor and his servants are bound by their oaths to defend the tree against all intruders, regardless of those intruders' intentions. He has no knowledge of what has transpired in the world since his death. Avor assumes that the characters are defilers sent by Nibenay, bent on obtaining the tree.

If the heroes have had success with negotiating so far, they might be tempted to try it again here. They might even persuade Avor that they are not defilers. Even if he believes them, however, the terms of Avor's oath prevent him from letting anyone remove the seed of life from this chamber or even from letting someone approach the tree. He engages in dialogue with characters, but if anyone moves east of the fountains or attacks in any way, Avor and all his followers fight back until they are destroyed.

Unlike most sentient undead, Avor had no desire to become this way. He swore his oath out of desperation and duty, but the eons have been agony to him. He is a tragic figure doomed to an eternal vigil. Avor cannot surrender the tree to anyone or allow himself to be destroyed through inaction; he is sworn to fight to the death against anyone who tries to harm the tree or to take a seed from it. If characters explain their mission, Avor understands that they have come to save the tree, not to harm it. He still can't let them come near.

Refer to the talking points below when forming Avor's responses to the heroes, and weave a sense of tragedy into his statements. Avor's telepathy allows him to be heard as if speaking modern Common instead of his outdated dialect.

- "We have not kept unceasing vigil across the centuries to fall prey to the lies of Nibenay's defilers."
- "It matters not who are you—no one shall desecrate our sacred tree."
- "Call me hypocrite if you will, for I myself have defiled lesser beings in carrying out my oath to protect the tree." [During the fight, characters might notice that sometimes when Avor attacks, the grass near him blackens and smokes.]
- "I, also, once hoped to bring life to the world. My duty and my oath are all that remain of me now."
- "The tree and its seed offer great power, but they are equally great burdens. Heed the path you choose here, as its course may become dark and wearisome beneath your feet."
- "My oath nears its end, and darkness drags at my soul. Now my charge passes to you. May you see it through with more wisdom than I."



Features of the Area

Illumination: The pillars and the tree glow softly and fill the chamber with dim light.

Ceiling: The ceiling is 30 feet high.

Fountains: The tree of life has infused both fountains with supernaturally vital water that is cool and refreshing. The water trickles from lion-headed carvings in the walls. Drinking from a fountain is a minor action. The liquid in the fountain to the north restores one healing surge; the water to the south grants resist 5 to all damage until the end of the drinker's next turn. A person can benefit from each fountain once per day. As with most magic fountains, the water loses its effectiveness if removed from this chamber. Squares occupied by the fountains are difficult terrain.

Pillars: Pillars block their squares and offer partial cover.

Tactics

The skeletons nearest Avor use their javelins to attack at range while those near the pillars move to intercept the characters. The crawling guardians engage any characters that try to close on Avor, who tries to keep his distance while focusing attacks against a leader or a striker. Avor uses *heat blast* when pressed by adjacent attackers.

If the thri-kreen are under the players' control, then the fight will be easier for the characters. Have the tree's defenders press every advantage to keep the tension high, including having Avor and the crawling guardians use the coup de grace action against helpless and dying enemies. If you control the thri-kreen, then have them make mostly basic attacks. This keeps the attention on the characters and makes your job easier.

Development

After the characters defeat the tree's guardians, they can investigate the chamber fully.

The tree of life is clearly ancient. Its bark is crumbling from the trunk, and its twisted branches are splitting from age. A DC 8 Nature check confirms that it is dying of old age. A single luminously brown seed cone with perfect symmetry hangs from one of the branches. Anyone who plucks it feels strong emotions of responsibility regarding the seed; it is difficult to discern whether these emotions arise from within, or whether the tree itself is trying to communicate something to the seed's recipient. The immediate strength of the emotions fades, but the feeling lingers. The green radiance fades from the tree after the seed has been removed.

Because of the life-sustaining energy of the tree, all characters can regain the use of one daily power that they have previously expended when they take the seed cone.

If the thri-kreen are cooperating with the heroes but do not fully trust them (because the characters used Bluff or Intimidate during the negotiation), then they might try to take the seed at this time. The most likely thing for them to do is to persuade the characters to let them carry the seed; then whoever has it dashes up the stairs while the others prevent the characters from pursuing.

A stone box is buried at the base of the tree. It can be seen easily, because the tree's roots have pushed it up. Inside, a gold cloth is draped around a simple silver headband (a level 10 *helm of heroes*) and a pair of *elven boots* (or magic items of similar levels from your players' wish lists). There are also six small stone tablets covered in ancient hieroglyphics. The secret of this writing was lost forever during the Cleansing Wars, but the message can be understood by using the Comprehend Language ritual (from the scroll found earlier in the adventure, if none of the characters know the ritual). The message reads:

I, Avor Firesworn, do make a record of the end of my days. Nibenay's foul defilers even now besiege our refuge; we shall not last the day. They are driven by hatred we do not understand to eradicate our people from the land. I do not know if other non-humans live still. After the battles in the Fields of Moriaton, I led my band here, where we have lived as beasts, hiding in the ground. We have prayed to Taraskir for guidance and protection but He has not answered our prayers. I no longer believe that He watches over us.

Instead, I have chosen to fight evil with evil – I have entered into the blood oath with the Dark One from the Gray beyond. It shall have my eternal soul and those of my brethren but it will grant us the power to protect our sacred Seed even after our deaths against any who try to possess it. Furthermore, I shall literally hide it within my own body and even when I fall in battle it will be protected; indeed my body will serve in death to nourish it.

I will hide this record according to the ways of my people in hopes to speak forth to the future as with the voice of dust from the earth. If you find the Seed or the Tree of Life that springs from it and I am not there to protect it, I exhort you to meditate upon the great cycle of Life. I exhort you to ask whether it be wisdom to protect the sources of Life. If you ponder these things in your own heart, with sincere intent, then you will know the truth of them and you will know what to do with the Seed. I, Avor Firesworn, do thus end my record and seal it up.

At this point, the players probably feel that they've accomplished their objective. Let them enjoy the moment.

They also need to weigh the implications of Avor's tragic end and his final message. Protecting the seed is a heavy responsibility. If the characters don't appreciate that, the thri-kreen are quick to point out that if the seed falls into the hands of a sorcerer-king, it will mean disaster for the entire Tyr Region.

The thri-kreen want to take the seed back to their homeland (wherever you decide it is), and that isn't a bad solution. The newborn tree of life would be far away and safe from the sorcerer-kings. It would also be far from the places where it's needed most.

When the characters leave here, they are ambushed by templars (see Encounter 5). If the thri-kreen's arguments haven't done it, this shocking turn of events should drive home the deadly seriousness of the characters' inherited burden.

5. Hard Choices

Encounter Level varies

Setup

Durok, toil templar (T)
1 human defiler (D)
1 salt golem (S)
5 goliath enforcers (G)
3 kank soldiers (K)
9 goliath toughs (E)

The situation awaiting the characters outside in the desert is dire. Just like Avor Firesworn and his allies centuries ago, they find themselves besieged inside the catacomb by the forces of a sorcerer-king bent on capturing the seed of life. A templar (Durok) accompanied by eighteen soldiers and a salt golem are ready to ambush them when they emerge from underground. The heroes are faced with the alternatives of handing over the seed, fighting an overwhelming enemy, sneaking past the cordon, fleeing into the desert, or perhaps even seeking assistance from the dark presence that Avor made a pact with ages ago.

The enemies can be from any city-state you choose. The descriptions and dialogue below assume that they came from Urik, but substitute whichever city and sorcerer-king suits your campaign. They were told where to look for the tree by their city's seers, and they narrowed down the area by watching the storms. The primal spirits knew that these were enemies, however, and worked to keep the entrances concealed from them. Unable to find the seed's precise location, the templars kept watch from a distance and waited for someone to discover the entrance. They approached the tunnel minutes after the heroes entered and set up their ambush.

Currently, the templar's force is split. Most of the ambushers wait outside the entrance used by the characters. Three goliath toughs and one kank soldier guard the entrance that the thri-kreen used.

The sun has just set when the characters return to the surface, so outside illumination is dark. In two hours, the moon Ral rises and illumination becomes dim again. The templar's soldiers carry lanterns that they keep shielded until the characters fall into their ambush.

As characters head back through the tunnels, ask whether they want to do anything special before leaving the catacomb.

The adventure can branch in many directions at this point. The most likely developments are described in the following sections. When in doubt, bear in mind that Durok was chosen to lead this mission because he is competent and careful. He won't make rookie tactical mistakes, and he's hard to fool. Durok can be outmaneuvered, but only by clever opponents.

Leave By the Main Entrance

Unless the players specify otherwise, assume that the characters head straight for the main entrance.

They can be ambushed in two places along this route: in the first room (Encounter 2) or outside. Inside, Durok's forces will hide in the narrow, flanking corridors until the characters are in the center of the room, then step out to cover the exits. Outside, they conceal themselves where they can close off both ends of the ravine.

Inside or out, Durok used two Silence ritual scrolls to prevent the sounds of his soldiers from being heard inside the catacomb. Characters need a passive Perception 27 or higher to hear mumbling and the muffled clanking of weapons and armor before they blunder into the ambush. Characters who pause and listen near the exit roll a normal Perception check, but the DC is still 27.

Assuming that the heroes fail to detect the ambush, the templars use their surprise round to move into position both behind and in front of the characters. Once that happens, see "Negotiate with Durok."

Explore the Northern Passage

If characters explore the passageway extending north from Encounter 3, they find that the rope left in the chimney by the thri-kreen is missing. The chimney is an uneven surface for climbing (DC 15 Athletics); the ascent is 40 feet (8 squares).

A goliath tough is standing guard at the top, totally concealed from below. You can either assume that his Stealth result is 13, or make a Stealth check for him with a +3 modifier. His Perception modifier is +4, so his passive Perception is 14. Two more goliath toughs and a kank soldier wait outside, about 20 feet from the rocks. The enemies posted here cannot see the templar's group in the ravine and vice versa.

If the characters throw a grappling hook or similar device up the chimney, the tough notices it automatically, throws the rope back down the hole, and alerts his companions, one of whom dashes off to tell the templar. The same thing happens if the goliath notices someone climbing up. Eight rounds after an alert is sounded, the templar and roughly half his soldiers arrive outside the cleft. Durok leaves the rest of his force, including the slow-moving salt golem and

the human defiler, to watch the main entrance in case this movement is a diversion.

A character who climbs to the top of the chimney without being noticed by the guard gets a surprise round if he decides to attack. The goliath tough is a minion who can be killed by a single dagger thrust, but players don't know that, so they'll need some grit to take the risk.

If characters kill all three goliath toughs silently, the kank soldier pays no attention to them. If one of the goliaths cries out, reinforcements arrive eight rounds later. That might be enough time for the characters to slip away into the night.

Take Refuge in the Catacomb

If characters detect the ambush, they are likely to retreat farther into the catacomb. This has the double advantage of forcing the enemy to attack through a narrow space and protecting the water source in the final chamber, which will be essential if the characters are besieged.

Durok is well aware of how lethal it would be to storm the narrow tunnels or charge down the spiral staircase. He will avoid doing so unless it becomes his only option.

Characters can get all the water they need from the fountains in the final chamber. They have only the food they brought with them, and they might have left most of that outside on pack animals. They can use the Nature skill or the Dungeoneering skill to forage for edible mosses and fungi in the last two chambers, but with a –5 modifier because of the limited ecology. Finding enough food for one person for 24 hours is a DC 15 check, and finding enough food for five people is a DC 25 check. Those DCs do not take the penalty into account. The characters can go without food for three weeks, however, before suffering any ill effects. The players' nerve is likely to crack before their characters' endurance does so. Further rules for starvation can be found in the *Rules Compendium* (page 180).

The enemy waiting outside has it worse. Durok's men have already consumed most of their supplies and stripped much of the area's forage while they were searching for the tree of life. Each man has one survival day remaining. When those are gone, they can slaughter their kanks for food; that will feed them for another three days.

After that, Durok's soldiers begin deserting at the rate of 1d6 per night. The goliath toughs leave first, then the goliath enforcers, and finally the human defiler. On the morning when the last of the goliath toughs are gone, Durok and whoever else remains (the salt golem, possibly the human defiler, and possibly one or two goliath enforcers) storm the catacomb. Emphasize the attackers' dust-caked, thirst-crazed desperation. The characters are likely to win this fight easily. They can finish it with a valuable hostage, if they take Durok alive.

Run for It

Heroes who kill the guards at the northern entrance might slip away into the desert, while characters who get themselves surrounded might run for their lives.

Assuming that characters make their break at night, darkness works in their favor. During the hours of darkness, they have total concealment and can't be followed, assuming that they get more than 10 squares away from all enemies. At that point, any enemies following the characters will slow down to take only one move action a turn (they won't double move) in an attempt to find the characters' trail; these attempts will fail if the characters stay more than 10 squares away. If the characters purposely move back within 10 squares of an enemy (to help a comrade, for example), then they can be spotted again under the normal rules for Stealth and Perception. At some stage, you may wish to transition from using the combat sequence to making skill checks involving Stealth, Endurance, and Perception (see "Aftermath").

After Ral rises, characters in the open have only partial concealment. They can be seen dimly from long distance when crossing open spaces, if anyone is positioned to see them.

The kanks that the templar's group brought along can be used as mounts, if the characters capture or steal them.

Even if the characters escape in darkness, Durok will track them as soon as the sun comes up. At that point, events have gone beyond this adventure, but you should keep the action moving. Durok has orders to bring back the seed of life at any cost, and he will follow the characters across the world if necessary to please his master. With the resources of a sorcerer-king behind him, Durok can become a challenging, recurring foe for many levels to come.

Negotiate with Durok

Durok has no intention of letting the seed get away from him. Being both patient and confident in his superior position, he is willing to converse with the adventurers for a while before resorting to force. So long as the characters keep talking without prattling or tossing threats, there's no need to roll for initiative or to position everyone on a battle map. Characters can move inside the ring of foes, but anyone who inches too close to the edge gets a stern warning from Durok. Conversation won't lull the templar into inattention. If he senses that the dialogue is going nowhere or that the characters are jockeying for position, the pleasantries are over.

The thri-kreen remain silent during this exchange unless someone addresses them directly.

Use the following talking points to guide Durok's conversation.

- "King Hamanu has authority over these lands, and as his agents, we are authorized to collect his belongings. Hand over the seed."
- "His highness's seers read the prophetic signs. We know that you retrieved a seed from a primordial tree of life in these ruins. Hand it over or die."
- "We can search your corpses, if you prefer. The choice is yours."
- "There's no need for all of you to die here. Tell me who has the seed. I will let everyone else go." (A DC 27 Insight check confirms that the offer is sincere.)
- "You must see that your position offers no way out. You did well to get this far, but you have lost. Now surrender the seed, and you can salvage your lives."
- "Stand where you are, or die where you are. I truly don't care which you choose, but I will have the seed."

If the characters hand over the seed without resistance, Durok might interrogate them about their other equipment, but ultimately, he will leave with just the seed. He realizes that the characters are dangerous foes and sees that nothing will be gained by fighting them unnecessarily.

It's possible for the characters to persuade Durok that they don't have the seed with a DC 24 Bluff check. Just one character makes the check, but others can aid the attempt. In this event, the defiler and four of the toughs are sent into the ruins to look for the seed. In the meantime, the characters are kept under close watch. The search party returns empty-handed after 15 minutes. Durok then orders his soldiers to search the adventurers thoroughly. Characters will be disarmed, searched minutely, and every detail of their gear will be checked. If they resist, roll for initiative; Durok orders an immediate attack.

The Thri-Kreen's Sacrifice: If the situation reaches a boiling point and it looks as if combat is inevitable, Chao-ka whispers to the closest hero: "We fight death givers. You run, fast. Protect the seed." Chao-ka gets an immediate surprise round, then everyone rolls initiative. From that point on, the action should move as fast as possible. The situation should result in utter confusion. You want players to act on the spur of the moment, the way their characters must. By the second or third round, the situation will be sorting itself out so that you can relax the pace. Until that happens, keep the pressure on.

The thri-kreen will fight to the death to provide an opening for the characters to escape. If they've been under the players' control up to this point, you need to take over for at least the first round of combat, though it's best if you still let the players roll dice for the thri-kreen's attacks. The thri-kreen will move adjacent to as many enemies as possible, even if doing so means risking attacks of opportunity and taking two move actions rather than attacking.

The Soul Collector's Intervention

If general combat breaks out, there's a good chance that it will quickly turn desperate for the characters.

When two or more characters are bloodied, or the first time a character drops below 1 hit point, read:

All around you is the fury and chaos of battle. Blood from a dozen cuts streams down your armor. Suddenly, all sound ceases. Everything that was a blur of motion moments ago, including you, is locked in place. Even arrows are frozen in mid-flight. Somehow, you are still aware of your surroundings and of the passage of time.

An unearthly, metallic message echoes in your mind: "Your flesh unwinds. Soon, your projection will pass across the barrier to this side. You will not be able to protect the life seed.

"Your quest need not end this way. I offer my protection to you, if you desire it. There is a price. Do you accept my aid?"

The speaker is the same entity that bargained with Avor. It seeks souls for its own purposes in the Shadowfell, which it refers to as the Gray.

The characters can question the entity, negotiate with it, and discuss their options with each other via a telepathic link created by the entity, within limits.

Don't let players debate for so long that the game drags, and don't allow them to turn this pause into a tactical planning session. The entity has suspended time so the characters can consider its offer. If they try to use the pause for some other purpose, the entity will simply let time resume. Use the following talking points to help formulate the entity's answers.

- "I collect the projections of creatures like yourselves."
- "Some like you prefer the word 'soul' to 'projection.' "
- "Projections are useful to me. If I do not collect projections within moments of their unbinding, they pass beyond my reach."
- "Your kind call my world 'the Gray.' "
- "When I am done with the collecting, then there will be the releasing."
- "My covenant with you would be this: My shadow will reside near your flesh. When projections are unbound from the flesh, I will be there to collect them. In return, I will confound your enemies so that you might go away from this place. This covenant will bind you for three cycles." (The entity uses the word "cycles" to mean years. In fact, it will agree to a period of just one year if the characters bargain for it.)
- "No direct harm will accrue to you from my shadow's presence. Indeed, when it rides upon you, you will have less reason to fear the son of air, but more fear for air's daughters." (In the entity's parlance, fire is the son of air, while cold and radiance are its daughters. A character can draw this connection with a DC 16 Religion check or with a DC 24 Arcana check or History check.)
- "Why do you resist? Should you survive this day, you will deflesh the projections of many enemies, whether or not my shadow accompanies you. And you are unlikely to survive this day without my aid. The covenant benefits us equally."
- "I offer this to one and all. Each may choose for itself. The more who accept my offer, the more my offer will aid you. But you must choose now."

In clear terms, the entity wants to send a portion of its essence everywhere the characters go and collect the souls of everyone who dies in their presence. This applies not only to the souls of enemies killed by the characters but to every soul released near a character who agrees to the bargain, up to and including the souls of the characters themselves if they die before the bargain expires. A character whose soul is claimed by the entity can be raised from the dead normally but returns with horrific memories of torment and abuse.

Players might want to use Insight checks to determine whether the entity is being truthful. A DC 16 Insight check reveals that everything the entity says is true. A DC 24 Insight check hints that it might be avoiding saying something. The point it steers away from is that it will take every soul released near the characters, regardless of whose it was or how its owner died. The entity would prefer that the characters misinterpret its words to mean that it will take only the souls of creatures killed by the characters. Be careful never to lie as the entity, but do anything short of lying to win the characters' confidence.

Once the heroes decide individually to accept or decline the bargain, the entity issues one last remark: "The covenant is bound, and the ether resumes its flow." With that, time resumes its normal passage.

For every character who accepted the bargain, one enemy creature is stunned for 1d10 + 3 rounds. Each character who accepted the bargain gains resist 2 fire, vulnerable 2 cold, and vulnerable 2 radiant. In addition, characters who accept the bargain take on an indefinite air of darkness: they cast darker shadows than others around them, fire burns slightly less brightly in their presence, they sometimes catch glimpses of fleeting shadows in their peripheral vision when nothing is there, fortunetellers recoil from them, and their sleep is sometimes troubled by dreams filled with images of flowing darkness and anguished souls. Nothing else sets these characters apart from anyone else.

The precise identity of this entity is left up to you. It can become the basis for many future adventures. If you decide to allow it, characters might be able to get out of the bargain by undertaking arduous quests, by discovering and using ancient rituals, or by embarking on a journey to the Shadowfell. Otherwise, the bargain concludes exactly one, two, or three years from the moment when it was agreed to.

Other Options

In a situation like this, expect the players to do the unexpected. They might hand over the seed, then try to ambush the templar's group on its journey home or sneak into its camp at night and steal the seed back. They might try slipping the seed into an enemy's pocket, where no one will search for it, and recover it later. They might retreat into the catacomb and use the Linked Portal ritual to escape to a prepared safe location.

Let players exercise their creative problem-solving muscles, and stay flexible.

Tactics

The defiler keeps his distance, using *lightning lance* freely. He uses *lightning serpent* on the opponent he deems the most likely to be carrying the seed. He uses *dimension door* only to escape.

Durok also keeps his distance, but gets close enough to use his whip. He uses *eldritch scourge* and *dazing bolts* to get away from attackers who harry him. The salt golem stays as close as possible to Durok and attacks anything that threatens the templar.

Half of the half-giant enforcers and toughs close into melee with the characters. The enforcers use *stone's endurance* at the first opportunity. The others stay close to either the defiler or Durok. As half-giants fall in melee, others move in to take their places.

Aftermath

This encounter can end in many different ways. The outcome depends on the actions of the characters and what direction you would like the campaign to take next. In all cases, the sense of victory at recovering the priceless seed of life should be tempered by the heavy burden that it has already become.

If the heroes choose to be defiant and fight to the bitter end without assistance, they are likely to be beaten. Defeat is a bitter pill for any group of players to swallow. In this situation, Durok is impressed by the characters' courage and fighting prowess, and he does not allow his soldiers to kill the characters. He might bring them back to his city-state as slaves to fight in the arena; sell them to a passing caravan; try to persuade them to join his personal retinue as bodyguards and templars-in-training; or leave them at the catacomb, unconscious and stripped of gear. Use this defeat to spur further adventures, not just to humiliate and frustrate the players. Athas is a harsh world where heroes learn that recovering from defeat is an important step on the road to victory. Defeated characters are going to want revenge; if that's their goal, then let them work for it, and keep the adventure coming.

If the characters hand over the seed, then Durok will let them go after some half-hearted harassment about "contraband" equipment.

Though it's unlikely, the adventurers might defeat Durok's band. In that case, they find supplies equal to 20 survival days, plus a level 12 magic item from one of their wish lists.

Human Defiler (D) — **Level 14 Artillery**
Medium natural humanoid — **XP 1,000**

HP 108; **Bloodied** 54 — **Initiative** +9
AC 26, **Fortitude** 25, **Reflex** 27, **Will** 26 — **Perception** +7
Speed 6

Traits

Defiling (necrotic)
Whenever the defiler uses an implement power, each enemy within 3 squares of it takes 5 necrotic damage.

Standard Actions

Staff (necrotic, weapon) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +19 vs. AC
Hit: 2d8 + 5 damage plus 2d8 necrotic damage.

Lightning Lance (implement, lightning) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Ranged 20 (one creature); +19 vs. Fortitude
Hit: 4d8 + 7 lightning damage.

Lightning Serpent (implement, lightning, poison) ✦ **Encounter**
Attack: Ranged 20 (one creature); +19 vs. Reflex
Hit: 2d8 + 9 lightning damage, and the target is slowed and takes ongoing 10 poison damage (save ends both).
Miss: Half damage, and the target is slowed until the end of its next turn.

Move Actions

Dimension Door (teleportation) ✦ **Encounter**
Effect: The defiler teleports 10 squares.

Triggered Actions

Defiling Serpent (healing) ✦ **Recharge** when first bloodied
Trigger: An enemy within 10 squares of the defiler spends a healing surge.
Effect (Free Action): The defiler regains a number of hit points equal to half the value of the triggering healing surge, and *lightning serpent* recharges.

Skills Arcana +19, Bluff +17

Str 13 (+8)	**Dex** 15 (+9)	**Wis** 10 (+7)
Con 18 (+11)	**Int** 24 (+14)	**Cha** 20 (+12)

Alignment evil — **Languages** Common
Equipment staff, spellbook

5 Goliath Enforcers (G) — **Level 8 Brute**
Medium natural humanoid — **XP 350 each**

HP 105; **Bloodied** 52 — **Initiative** +7
AC 21, **Fortitude** 20, **Reflex** 20, **Will** 19 — **Perception** +6
Speed 6

Standard Actions

⊕ **Greatclub** (weapon) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +13 vs. AC
Hit: 4d6 + 6 damage.

Minor Actions

↓ **Push Through** ✦ **Recharge** when first bloodied
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +11 vs. Fortitude
Hit: The goliath pushes the target, knocks it prone, and shifts 1 square to the square the target vacated.

Stone's Endurance ✦ **Encounter**
Effect: The goliath gains resist 5 to all damage until the end of its next turn.

Triggered Actions

↓ **Vengeful Clout** (weapon) ✦ **Encounter**
Trigger: The goliath drops to 0 hit points.
Attack (Immediate Interrupt): Melee 1 (one creature); +11 vs. Fortitude
Hit: 4d6 + 6 damage, and the target falls prone.

Skills Athletics +14, Intimidate +10, Nature +11

Str 20 (+9)	**Dex** 17 (+7)	**Wis** 15 (+6)
Con 15 (+6)	**Int** 11 (+4)	**Cha** 12 (+5)

Alignment unaligned — **Languages** Common
Equipment hide armor, greatclub

Salt Golem (S) — **Level 11 Elite Brute**
Large natural animate (construct) — **XP 1,200**

HP 278; **Bloodied** 139 — **Initiative** +6
AC 24, **Fortitude** 23, **Reflex** 21, **Will** 23 — **Perception** +9
Speed 5 (cannot shift) — Darkvision
Immune disease, poison, sleep
Saving Throws +2; **Action Points** 1

Traits

☼ **Toxic Salt** (poison) ✦ **Aura** 2
Any enemy that starts its turn within the aura takes a -2 penalty to all defenses until the end of its next turn. If the enemy is bloodied, it also takes 5 poison damage.

Standard Actions

⊕ **Slam** (poison) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); +16 vs. AC
Hit: 4d6 + 6 damage, and the target takes ongoing 5 poison damage and a -2 penalty to attack rolls (save ends both).

↓ **Double Attack** ✦ **At-Will**
Effect: The golem uses *slam* twice.

Horrid Dehydration ✦ **Recharge** 6
Attack: Close burst 3 (enemies in the burst); +12 vs. Fortitude
Hit: 4d10 + 3 damage, and the target is weakened and slowed until the end of the golem's next turn. A bloodied target is instead weakened and slowed (save ends both).

Str 22 (+11)	**Dex** 12 (+6)	**Wis** 18 (+9)
Con 19 (+9)	**Int** 3 (+1)	**Cha** 3 (+1)

Alignment unaligned — **Languages** –

Durok, Toil Templar (T) — **Level 14 Controller**
Medium natural humanoid, human — **XP 1,000**

HP 133; **Bloodied** 66 — **Initiative** +7
AC 26, **Fortitude** 26, **Reflex** 24, **Will** 28 — **Perception** +9
Speed 6

Standard Actions

⊕ **Whip** (weapon) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); +18 vs. AC
Hit: 3d8 + 9 damage, and the templar pushes the target 2 squares.

Eldritch Scourge (force, implement) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Ranged 5 (one creature); +18 vs. Reflex
Hit: 3d8 + 7 force damage, and the templar knocks the target prone.

↓ **Dazing Bolts** (implement, lightning) ✦ **Encounter**
Attack: Ranged 10 (one or two creatures); +18 vs. Reflex
Hit: 3d10 + 6 lightning damage, and the target is dazed until the end of the templar's next turn.

Sulfurous Detonation (fire, implement, poison, zone) ✦ **Encounter**
Attack: Area burst 2 within 10 (enemies in the burst); +18 vs. Reflex
Hit: 4d6 + 8 fire damage.
Effect: The burst creates a zone that lasts until the end of the templar's next turn. Any enemy that ends its turn in the zone takes 5 poison damage.

Skills Arcana +14, Intimidate +18

Str 18 (+11)	**Dex** 11 (+7)	**Wis** 15 (+9)
Con 13 (+8)	**Int** 14 (+9)	**Cha** 22 (+13)

Alignment evil — **Languages** Common
Equipment robes, whip, rod

3 Kank Soldiers (K)	Level 4 Soldier
Large natural beast (mount)	XP 175 each
HP 54; **Bloodied** 27	**Initiative** +7
AC 20, **Fortitude** 17, **Reflex** 16, **Will** 14	**Perception** +8
Speed 8	
Resist 5 acid, 5 poison	

Traits

Grabbed Advantage (mount)

A friendly rider of 4th level or higher mounted on the soldier has combat advantage against any creature grabbed by the soldier.

Standard Actions

Bite ✦ At-Will

Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +9 vs. AC, or +11 against creatures grabbed by the soldier. While the soldier has a creature grabbed, it can use *bite* against the grabbed creature only.

Hit: 2d4 damage, or 2d4 + 10 against creatures grabbed by the soldier. In addition, the soldier grabs the target.

Kank Venom (poison) **✦ Recharge** ⚄ ⚅

Attack: Melee 1 (one creature grabbed by the soldier); +9 vs. Fortitude

Hit: The target is slowed and takes ongoing 10 poison damage (save ends both).

First Failed Saving Throw: The target is immobilized (save ends).

Str 18 (+6)	**Dex** 16 (+5)	**Wis** 12 (+3)
Con 14 (+4)	**Int** 2 (-2)	**Cha** 6 (+0)

Alignment unaligned **Languages** –

9 Goliath Toughs (E)	Level 7 Minion Skirmisher
Medium natural humanoid	XP 75 each
HP 1; a missed attack never damages a minion.	**Initiative** +5
AC 21, **Fortitude** 20, **Reflex** 17, **Will** 18	**Perception** +4
Speed 6	

Traits

Rush into Battle

Whenever the goliath hits a creature with a charge attack, the target grants combat advantage until the end of the goliath's next turn.

Standard Actions

Club (weapon) **✦ At-Will**

Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +12 vs. AC

Hit: 7 damage.

Str 14 (+5)	**Dex** 11 (+3)	**Wis** 12 (+4)
Con 13 (+4)	**Int** 10 (+3)	**Cha** 13 (+4)

Alignment unaligned **Languages** Common

Equipment club

A NOTE ON MONSTERS

Four of the monsters in this adventure are creatures from *Monster Manual 3* and *Monster Vault* that have been reskinned and adapted to Dark Sun for this adventure.

The ashen crawler is identical to the obsidian gargoyle (*Monster Manual 3*, page 93) with two exceptions: the gargoyle's flight is replaced by spider climb, and the creature's type changes from elemental humanoid (earth) to natural animate (undead).

The spectral kirre is identical to the sovereign wraith (*Monster Vault*, page 287) with three exceptions: its type is beast instead of humanoid, the *spawn wraith* trait is removed, and *spectral sword* is renamed *spectral claw*.

The crawling guardian is identical to the stirge suckerling swarm (*Monster Vault*, page 261) with three exceptions: the stirges' flight becomes climb, *swarm of stirges* is renamed *swarm of claws*, and *hungry flight* is renamed *grasping claws*.

The goliath tough is identical to the human thug (*Monster Vault*, page 172).

About the Author

Jared Espley has been playing D&D since he received the red box edition sometime in the early 80s. One of his favorite characters is a feral halfling druid inspired by the Dark Sun campaign world. "Beneath the Dust" is his first published adventure. In his day job, Jared works for NASA designing instruments to explore the Solar System and analyzing the data we receive from them.

He would like to thank his friends George Allison, Marcotte Anderson, Ian Barland, Scott Berger, Michael Braby, Michael "Dusty" Capistran, Brock Fanning, Tom King, Claudia Knez, Scott Krize, Colby Lemon, Dave Maillett, Wood Muire, Lance Preutt, Greg Romano, Ryan Schutt, and Jonathon Tivel for their playtesting help.

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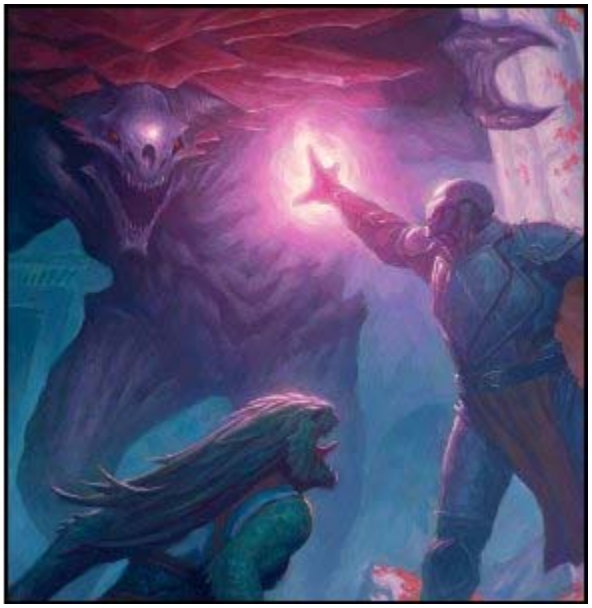
Thinking Outside the Encounter

Dungeon Editorial

by Steve Winter



Dungeons & Dragons groups play the game in many different ways. Some tackle nothing less than world-spanning, reality-shattering epics; others have no long-range objectives beyond sacking the next ancient tomb or forgotten temple. Some engage in dice-free roleplaying encounters that span multiple sessions; others get restless if 15 minutes slip by without an attack roll.

Most groups fall somewhere between those extremes. Variety is the spice of imaginary life, too.

That's why one of our goals for 2011 is to get more diversity into *Dungeon* magazine's adventures. We intend to mix things up with a wider variety of levels, settings, lengths, and styles.

Setting is the easiest element of an adventure for a DM to adjust, so we have a lot of leeway in that area. We won't put a *Forgotten Realms*, *Eberron*, or *Dark Sun* logo on an adventure unless something about it really speaks to that setting. Many proposals for world-specific adventures land in our inbox, but most of them have few ties to their settings beyond place names. More than sand, wind, and gladiators are needed, for example, for an adventure to be unique to Athas. Shifting an adventure from the general to the specific—from "the city of Hunkerdown on the river" to "the city of Iriaebor on the river Chionthar in Sunset Vale"—is easier than moving it in the other direction.

We see Chaos Scar adventures in much the same light. All of them have a place in the Chaos Scar, but that's a technicality; they're equally at home anywhere a DM needs an evening's worth of adventure, and we suspect that more of them get used as one-offs than in dedicated Chaos Scar campaigns.

What we're really interested in exploring is adventure style and presentation. People love to categorize things, and we're no different. There's no standard classification system for adventures, but they tend to be discussed in terms of opposites: linear vs. branching; event-driven vs. location-driven; sandbox vs. shadowbox; scripted vs. open-ended; framework vs. in-depth.

For quite a while, we've emphasized event-driven, scripted adventures presented in detail. That's partly because 4th Edition is a detail-oriented game, and the form of adventures frequently mirrors the form of the game. But that shouldn't limit what we do.

So we intend to experiment a bit with adventures. That applies to theme, structure, and presentation. We might do a few with a wide-open structure that include no preplanned encounters; a few that link across months; a few based around unusual maps; maybe even a few where the goal is to avoid combat rather than to seek it out; and perhaps some that are suitable for a wide range of levels or tiers.

Those are a few of our ideas. Plenty of experienced, talented DMs are reading this, too, and they have run countless adventures that twist and rip the envelope in exciting ways. If you're one of them, we want to see your proposals. Send an outline, along with notes on what makes your adventure different, to submissions@dndinsider.com. Be sure to put an informative subject line on your email, and it can't hurt to review our submission guidelines, too.

If you're not interested in writing adventures for *Dungeon* magazine, please tell us what you'd like to see. The address for that is dndinsider@wizards.com.

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February Adventure Hooks

Doing Your Groundwork

Every adventure begins with a subtle or not-so-subtle hook—that carrot or stick which motivates the characters to risk their lives for gold, glory, or the greater good. Some hooks are instantaneous and unavoidable. When a dragon drops from the sky into a screaming dive straight toward you, the adventure is on whether you like it or not. Most adventures, though, benefit from having some groundwork laid before the main structure gets built. Clues need to be sprinkled in the characters' paths, rumors whispered in their ears, unsigned notes left in their saddlebags, or magic relics of unknown origin discovered in a forgotten tomb or delivered to their rooms in the dead of night. These types of hooks are most effective when players have time to wonder about them for a few game sessions before their meaning becomes clear.

That's the purpose of this article. It presents the hooks and rumors you can sprinkle around the inn weeks before launching characters into an adventure. If you inadvertently insert a few leads into the game which never pan out, you've still made the world feel like a bigger place than your dining room table.

Andok Sur

Andok Sur is an ancient necropolis in the Nentir Vale's northeastern reaches. It was introduced in the **Dungeons & Dragons** novel *The Mark of Nerath*. This adventure locale features two encounters that you can use in any D&D campaign setting. The necropolis is equally well suited to the Chaos Scar, Faerun, Eberron, Athas, or your home campaign. It is intended for characters of levels 3–8 to explore, but can easily be adjusted upward to challenge characters of higher levels.

Overview

Beyond the storm-shrouded peak of Thunderspire Mountain, hidden beneath the desolate reaches of the Old Hills, the necropolis of Andok Sur rests in eternal slumber. At least, it had been resting until the lich Magroth entered the entombed necropolis and attempted to raise an army of undead. Though Magroth failed, Andok Sur remains active, lending new dangers to the Old Hills and the surrounding areas.

What Everyone Knows

The Old Hills cover a large portion of the northeastern section of the Nentir Vale, bordered by the Trade Road to the south and Lake Nen to the north. They roll away from Thunderspire Mountain to the southwest, and eventually rise into the Dawnforge Mountains to the east. The area is difficult to travel aside from the few roads; ravines and depressions crisscross the land, and the worn hills form walls that give the otherwise open country a feeling of oppressiveness and confinement.

Various threats roam the Old Hills and the surrounding environs, including bandits, goblin and kobold tribes, giant spiders, drakes, and the occasional drow or duergar raiding party from the depths of Thunderspire.

Becoming Aware of the Situation

You can sprinkle this information into the campaign as rumors overheard in the inn or marketplace, or it could be presented directly to characters by a patron or concerned citizen.

Rumors of Undead: Since Magroth stirred up Andok Sur, undead creatures have been seen wandering the region. Zombies, skeletons, and ghouls are the most common, but wights, wraiths, ghosts, and even a vampire have been reported. Most of these sightings have occurred along the chief trade road through the area.

The Hole: Walking or riding into the Old Hills from the base of Thunderspire leads to a relatively new feature of the area. A gaping hole in the earth shows where part of the hillside collapsed into the ground. The sinkhole opens to reveal a huge cavern containing a sunken city. Characters could hear about this from travelers or stumble onto it themselves while traveling or searching for something else.

The Abyssal Plague: If you incorporate the abyssal plague into your campaign, Andok Sur is where it originates. Characters should be drawn to the area if they're trying to solve the mystery of the plague's origin, because this is where it was first reported.

Digging Further

Characters who live in the area should already know something of the history of Andok Sur. If they're newcomers, the basics can be gleaned by talking to locals. Spending a few days on research can turn up the rest. The most likely sources for additional information are scholarly sages, bards, priests of established churches, and libraries (if any exist in the area—actual libraries may be few and far between in a points-of-light campaign). You could restrict the most obscure historical information to characters trained in History, but that's not strictly necessary. It really depends on how much you want characters to know beforehand about what they're getting into.

History, DC 15: Andok Sur was ancient when the empire of Bael Turath was just a collection of loosely allied city-states. The place was established by the warrior tribes of the Eastern Valley and dedicated to the Demon Prince Orcus. In those years, it was an aboveground site where warrior tribes interred their still-living enemies. Tombs and mausoleums filled the necropolis as houses fill a town.

History, DC 24: Centuries past, the vampire lord Zarguna turned Andok Sur into a vibrant City of the Dead centered around worship of Orcus. Zarguna's shadowy hand commanded almost all of the Eastern Vale. As the city grew in size and power, it attracted the attention of other influential agencies, including the growing empires of Bael Turath and Arkhosia, as well as the nearby dwarven empire of Mithralfast. Even divine powers saw Andok Sur as a threat to the natural world. At the height of the city’s power, a great earthquake rocked the Old Hills. In an instant, the City of the Dead was shattered. It fell into the earth and was buried, to be forgotten by time and history.

Object Reading Ritual: If characters obtain an object from Andok Sur (possibly through the use of Streetwise or Thievery), they can learn whatever you care to reveal about conditions there up until the time the object was removed.

Streetwise, DC 16: Weeks ago (or months, depending on your timeline), a group of adventurers foiled an attempt by a vampire lich to raise the dead of Andok Sur and restore the city to its ancient glory. They didn't wipe out all the undead or return them to rest, however, and now those undead are spreading across the landscape.

Streetwise, DC 24: The characters may be able to locate the NPCs who stopped Magroth's plot and speak to them directly. This shouldn't happen by chance; characters need to look for these specific NPCs and put some effort into the search to have any chance for success. In this case, the characters learn that Andok Sur is where the Abyssal Plague first entered the world. Along with the awakened undead, the necropolis holds a special significance to those blighted by the demonic infection from another plane of existence.

Beneath the Dust

This **Dark Sun** adventure deals with the discovery of a living relic from an age long past—a seed from a dying primordial Tree of Life. Trees of Life are supernatural organisms capable of bringing life to broad regions, which makes them of great value to anyone interested in restoring vitality to the devastated world of Athas. For this same reason, they are also highly sought after by defilers, and by sorcerer-kings in

particular. "Beneath the Dust" is intended for characters of levels 7-9.

Background

In a nearly forgotten age of genocidal warfare, elves and gnomes who were fleeing from the sorcerer-king Nibenay took refuge in an ancient tomb that connected to a small cave system. They carried a seed from a Tree of Life, and they needed to keep it out of Nibenay's hands at any cost. Nibenay's forces tracked them to the cave, however, and besieged them.

Avor Firesworn, leader of the refugees, made a desperate, fateful decision. He entered into a covenant with an alien entity from the Gray which Avor perceived as a demigod of death. He and a few others from his band swore a binding oath to exchange their eternal souls for the chance to protect the seed even after their deaths.

Eventually, Nibenay's soldiers broke into the cavern and slaughtered everyone, but they could not find the seed. It lay beneath Avor's remains, but according to their agreement, the primal spirits of that place prevented the searchers from seeing it. Nibenay's frustrated agents concluded that the seed had been no more than a rumor, or perhaps this group had been a ruse to draw them away from the real seed's location. They sealed the cave when they withdrew, to conceal their handiwork from enemies.

Some time later, Avor's spirit returned from death as an ashen soul and began its lifeless, eternal vigil over the seed.

Now

Ages have passed. The land is a desolate ruin. But in that forgotten cave, Avor still keeps his unceasing watch. And as the centuries ticked by, something miraculous occurred. In the dark, barren cave, the Seed of Life took root among Avor's bones and grew into a mighty tree. Its presence caused more life to spring forth—moss grew on the walls of the cave, vines snaked through ancient battle sites, and the air became fresh.

Even Trees of Life are not immortal, however, and after many an age, the Tree grew old. Sensing the approach of its own demise, the Tree sent its roots far afield in an attempt to tear open the tomb and spread outside. The seal on the cave cracked and for the first time in ages, the world above had sign of the Tree. The primal spirits rejoiced in this event and brought forth storms to excavate more of the cave mouth, in the hope that passing creatures might notice the miracle and carry a new seed to where it can flourish.

Involving the Adventurers

Characters can be drawn into this adventure several ways.

A Mission for My Sins: Powerful defilers are always alert for signs that a Tree of Life has awakened. If characters work directly or indirectly for a sorcerer-king, an NPC defiler, or a merchant house, or if they are templars or defilers themselves, they may have received clues to the Tree's whereabouts. In that case, they've been commissioned to investigate and given the following information:

- There is reason to believe that a living Tree of Life may be growing in a region of sandy waste in the valleys east of the nearest, major trade route.
- If the characters find a Tree, they should conceal its location and return as quickly as possible. If they find a seed, they should bring it back immediately.
- The signs of a Tree are not easy to discern unless you know how to read them. In particular, primal forces in the area may be trying to draw attention to the tree.
- It is likely that other groups are also aware of the Tree's potential and searching for it.

A Mission for Their Sins: This develops along essentially the same lines as the situation above, except the characters are associated with the Veiled Alliance or a primal mentor such as a guardian druid. Alternatively, they could be approached by a neutral scholar whose divinations or prophetic interpretations have led him to suspect a Tree of Life's reappearance. In this case, they may be told (or experience) any of the information from above along with any of the following:

- Characters who have a deep primal connection may have dreams that allude to the agitation and excitement of the primal spirits in the area where the Tree exists.
- Portents point toward an artifact of great importance to the primal spirits arising in a region of sandy waste in the valleys east of the nearest, major trade route.
- Odd storms have been seen on the horizon. Storms are a common occurrence, but these have been unnaturally small, stationary, and brief—almost as if some force is trying to draw attention.
- The signs of a Tree are not easy to discern unless you know how to read them. In particular, primal forces in the area may be trying to draw attention to the tree, a fact that makes the observed storms even more significant.
- If a Tree of Life is involved, it is absolutely essential that it not fall into the hands of someone who might abuse its power. It would be better for a Tree or seed to be destroyed than for it to be captured by a defiler.

What's That Storm?: It's entirely possible that the characters themselves spot the odd storms. A perfect way to introduce the storms is while the characters are traveling between city-states either on their own or as part of a caravan. The storms can be observed intermittently over the course of several days and nights (lightning flashes are visible at night). If the characters are traveling with a caravan, indicate that most of the travelers are either unaware of the storms or pay no attention to them, but a few—templars or characters who have the look of defilers about them—do show an interest. If necessary, the characters can be approached surreptitiously by a fellow traveler who is also a member of the Veiled Alliance. That NPC is interested in leaving the caravan to investigate the distant phenomenon and needs companions for safety.

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